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# Scorpion Wine: A Short Story Collection

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**Scorpion Wine**

A Collection of Short Stories

By

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B.A., New York University, 2007

M.F.A., University of Colorado, Boulder, 2011

A Thesis Submitted to the

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The thesis entitled:  
Scorpion Wine: A Short Story Collection  
written by Etkin Camoglu  
has been approved for the Department of English

Marcia Douglas, Committee Chair

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Date: April 13, 2011

The final copy of this has been examined by the signatories, and we find that  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

## Abstract

The stories of *Scorpion Wine* are written in my own shadow, in the desert of my birth, the skyscraper of my adolescence, the blood of my second tongue. And from this shadow, ghosts of faces suggest characters. But as with any timestamp that is now far away, and any face that is now merely a silhouette, the details of the stories, the contours, the words, this is all fiction. At first these details exist in a mirage—a brutal heat of Sonoran noon, an early mist of channel calm, the smoggy lust of an uptown side-street. And though I know how the fates of the faces will construct my creation, it is only when I too am engulfed in the mirage that I understand the end. Endings are important to me and with each line of prose I lay at rest on the page, I deliberate its truth so as to free myself and my protagonist in our crystallized finale, the story.

For me, there are secrets within any type of encounter, be it one of long ago that lingers in my daydreams, or one that is frozen within the solid letters or frames of another text. As a writer, it is my duty to free these secrets into their own story. And so, sometimes the mirage is not sprung from a place-memory at all, but from a line in a newspaper clipping. In Tokyo, it is not uncommon for certain lonely individuals to rent a cat for a night. Why? The explanation is in *RentACat*. The cat of the story is based on my own cat Flashlight, who happens to be my most loyal and encouraging desk mate. He is the model for the story, I the painter. He posed, I observed, and tried to most faithfully depict his long hours of slumber, the way his tongue whips against his fur, the way his claws come out in stretch, then retract, the way his ears when I curl them back stick there for a moment, then pop back up.

Similarly, *The Tourist* emerged from a picture I took on the Blue Coast of Turkey. In a small fishing town by Kalkan, by the docks, tucked between haphazard buildings pressed against each other of varying heights, and minimal width, there is a small alley. The sign to the side reads *Balik Tutan Sasi Kedi Sokagi*. A poem of its own right, almost forgotten, a question that begs to be narrated.

And then there is *Scorpion Wine* itself, the sole story included about childhood. The witch in the bathroom, a spider that dangles down to the face, a scorpion that can evaporate in wine, a little girl who wants so bad to be cruel to a little boy—these are all things that happen, the possibility of which we so easily forget when we grow up. The need to hurt that comes out of the loneliness of littleness, and the urge to imagine, to find another world to exist in that comes out of silence—this is where creation begins I believe. And all that comes after, the city, the party, the beautiful dress, the long inhale of smoke, and the even longer night spent in the attempt to love another—all are merely reverberations, delicately tainted mirages colored by the places and ghosts of the past.

Looking back now, I see that there are motifs throughout the stories that I myself am only now conscious of. Eyes, blue, water, creaks, groans, gowns, growls, gurgles. Flutes, flames, fringes. Girls with porcelain skin, spaces made of uneven walls. Cat tail corners, cervical facial features. But perhaps these are the most telling moments here. When nightmares collide with the tapping of fingers. When undermined longings, or long lost dreams, erupt into the oh so fragile flux of the page.

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## Scorpion Wine

It's night and the crickets rub themselves in the garden under the dippers. Edward looks at planets through the big red telescope. I lay upside down turned around, bare feet hitting the wood wall against the leather love chair. The wall shoots up to the skylights, stained glass tulips, green stems, long bowed leaves, light yellow flowers wrapped up. The moon shines through them, the whole house empty. Nana's in her room on the other far end past Edward's blue room. My room is pink but I can't go in there now because Witch is in my bathroom. She comes at night, stays against my shower wall so that the moonshine and star beams don't hit and melt her.

Daytime brings the mid-summer hundreds. Coyotes wail in the cool early morning, run past the house gutter where scorpions and spiders and mites are dumped from pesticide. It's coyote snack, dead insect abdomens and full festered egg sacks. Their sad howls tell Witch to go, it's sun, a reminder that the desert will always be underneath, seeping through the pipes.

With noon the heat is in full bloom, figs fat, watermelons ready. I like this heat. Unlike Witch who hides, who wasn't born here anyway. She comes from cold, with her white skin, her faceless face. I put on my bikini, the only one I have, sent last year from Mum Bunny. It has a tutu polka dot skirt and a big bow where my breasts will be.

As long as you sit straight, Nana promises.

I stick out my tummy to see if they've come in yet. When I lay out on the grass my wing bones cut through the towel. Yolanda brings mint lemonade. I tell her to make tamales for lunch. Then I hear her smacking around with the broom. When I look up,

she's hitting the wall of the house, up, way up the out door fireplace. Pack pack tack tack smo smo smo. The sound changes on angle.

When she's finished, a tarantula swings down, slows the hot air as he goes till he's on the ground. All eight of his legs curl into death. Yolanda sweeps him into the dustpan then takes him inside. I hear the gurgle of the garbage disposal. Chop chop, swoosh, tarantula mutilation.

Now when the black widow beelines down from the tulip moon window to my toes I don't scream. It's only fair. I let her lick my toes with her small felt tongue then watch as her eyes go into hippie red and black disco swirl. She tries to hypnotize me. I fill my cheeks puffin style. Ready set go. Her eyes turn back into her head then she flashes her tiny fangs. I see the venom ooze through the dark spaces. She picks my big toe, the one that curls left, starts to inject. She doesn't go very far, very deep. She bites for only a second, a needle prick of anger.

And I've been stung, bitten, before. A bee when I cut down a red rose. Soft daddy long legs kisses underneath bed covers. The lobster snappers living in honeysuckles. Always a bump afterwards, itchy and bubbling beneath skin. But even so, even though she is kind, this time I can't breathe.

I run off the couch, turn my body back straight from the moon. I want to yell but only air comes out. When I make it to Nana it's nearly a minute, no air to my body, to my gut. Nana tucks me into herself, under her silk blanket. Her hands feel cool on my wet cheeks.

She sings me her tune, the three-note chord.



Edward stands in the doorway as I start to calm, his magic Tesla space hat on his head. He leaves his door open, lets Nana's lilac face cream seep from pore to pore. Dawn opens again with coyote. I see Witch leave through the watermelon vines. She is covered in her cape, a shadow against the vegetable garden saguaro. A white triangle of her face, the dead stalk of a jumping cactus.

For breakfast Nana fries runny eggs and lets me watch Mr. Rogers. She makes lemon tea and covers my toe with Vaseline. It's gotten big and hot and pushes even further left.

Be careful, she says, don't wear bad fancy shoes or else your toe will always look like this. She promises Yolanda will bake candy cinnamon apples.

I sit for a while on the swing by the fig tree in my bikini and wish that the widow sucked my breast instead to make it grow. I slouch down the way Nana never likes and watch my belly roll into itself. Then I stick out my feet and look at the ugly way the toe makes my feet uneven trolls. It's gone down by now, mostly gone, but I can still feel the secret pulse. The spider's liquid throbs the toe every now and then, reminds me of her power.

When they're ready, Edward and I eat the candy apples, a spoon of vanilla bean each to top. Nana sips iced tea because she never eats before guests.

The Silverthorne's are coming, she reminds us.

We lick our fingers of sticky candy glaze. A baby bird splats to the ground. His insides make a small blood mark against the tan slab stone, his furless body grey to his gall bladder. Only an orange triangle of a beak.

Poor bird, says Nana and calls Yolanda.

I watch the ants merge on a highway to flesh. Yolanda sweeps the baby into her dustpan. This time I know it will be coyote snack, the sun leathering it in the gutter to jerky.

After, Edward rides his bike down the road to the pool. He makes paper boat airplanes. I bike with him a bit then go back to my room. They wait for afternoon tea. Samantha wants her red and white dress today and I make sure that Elenora is tucked into her crib. Scarlett and Madame Alexander sit side by side and Toto the monkey dangles from the window ledge. He has his banana in hand ready to shoot but I won't let him. Then I read the cards from Mum Bunny faraway in the mountains. The envelopes never show where she is, but once Edward told me that she is breathing in snow air till she gets better. Nana won't say. Every year the cards are in long, thin letters spelling out my name. And it's your birthday, party, party, don't be too sweet. Her lips sign lipstick with two floppy ears. I put the cards back under my bed. Nana comes in with the birds in the trees. They start to sing as the sun comes down. She puts a dress on a chair.

When you've washed your hair, bring your ribbons for your braids.

Yolanda fills up the bathtub and makes bubbles. The shower behind is already getting dark but there is still time. I start with my feet, go in bit-by-bit, feel the water suction against the toe. I point it out above the surface. The hot water makes it crimson, even more than the other toes. I want to squeeze it. When I do, the flesh pops, oozes out a small yellow worm. The worm is as hard as fingernail. I slide over to the toilet bowl, my body goose bumping out of the water. I flick the worm in, flush, watch it swivel into the house bowels.

Back in the water I take foam and cover my arms, my chin, my eyebrows. Since last summer Edward stopped making Santa Claus with me. It's only me now and I cover myself with the bubble every time it melts away. When I stand up I plop some on the cut out spot down below, past my belly. I know this is secret too, like Witch, growing out of the same winter place she came from.

After, Nana braids my hair tight, pulling each section away, this then that way, cross, criss, cross. She ties the ends puffing out the loops of the ribbon. Yolanda takes the dryer, makes me hold it on each side till it dries.

One day we'll get you some perm waves, Nana says.

She clacks her high heels to the kitchen past the love seat. I dry and watch the wall, look up to the tulips, the moon just reaching the sky, still a deep blue on the edges. The tulips quiver. My elbow gets heavy and I switch to the other side.

Keep it straight, Nana yells from the vapors of the stove.

Yolanda peels the potatoes and Nana gives her a stack of green onions from the garden. Dried sage; mint; sun crisped, mini-tomatoes. The vapor starts to drift toward me. I smell the rack of lamb in the oven and see the way the invisible scent wafts. It rainbows the same way that the sunset becomes part of the rock with the red ant hives and rotted magenta cacti fruit.

When the Silverthorne's show up I'm dry, braided, tucked in dress. Edward comes out with his Tesla hat. Tonight he says he's an inventor. The moon tries to cut out from the tulips but I tell it not to. In blackness the Witch can stay away. I follow Nana to the door, hide behind her dress, her heels. When she opens the night I see Mrs. Silverthorne's silver feet. Behind her is William. William is very little.

Nana says, you remember William, don't you?

Once when he came to play, I locked him in the garden shed. They got scared that he ran away. Yolanda finally opened the shed. He was asleep on the old cobwebbed lounge chair cushions. After, a hole he never found in the back of the shed got boarded up.

Now Nana takes my hand, pulls me in front of her. William looks up Mrs. Silverthorne's pastel painted fingers. Nana takes my wrist out and we shake hands. He gives me a play-dough thing supposed to be a butterfly. I let Nana hold it. He has his hair slicked back and his shirt tucked into his pants. They stop at his ankles and show his socks pulled all the way straight. I walk away.

Back in my room the moon hides behind a cloud. Yolanda hasn't come around to close the curtains. I lower them just barely, reaching to unwind the rope from the hooks, cut out the stars. Samantha snaps her eyes. Scarlett shifts her velvet, makes room for Madame. Elenora blows bubbles. Then I hear Witch scratching the tile paste, the spaces she eats clay from. William and Edward go past into the blue room. Edward tells William he can be the apprentice. The scratching gets faster. I make my way slowly to the bathroom door. Moonbeams start to shoot through curtain spaces. When I reach the tile of the bathroom, Witch is silent. A beam rays down to a spot before the cave opening of the shower. A florescent green scorpion waits, the size of my pinkie nail. The small, almost colorless ones are killers I know. The story of the woman who died stepping into a slipper, the man who drank a glass of white grape juice. The beam shifts in the sky and for a moment it magnifies. I see the pinchers clearly, curled in, still. I slide it onto a

tissue, fold it flat to the cupped floor of my dress pocket. As I shut my room, Nana calls out.

Come to dinner, wash your hands, the roast is hot.

The dining room is behind the kitchen, swung open by a swinging door. Mrs. Silverthorne sits at one end of the round table and Nana at the other. Yolanda pours from a bottle into Mrs. Silverthorne's cup. Nana likes wine with guests.

California sweet wine, a bit of bubble to it. Should we let the little ones have some?

Yolanda pours a drop into the red cups, with water to mix. Mrs. Silverthorne smiles, sips. Her pastel fingers grip the glass stem. Edward and William swing in. William has on the fool cape, white and green jester pattern. He starts to follow me as I circle the table. I feel his feet creeping behind me. There are four seats but I can't decide. I run out the swinging door into the kitchen. Yolanda is making our wine. I grab two and turn back to face the swinging door. I push open with my knee. William and Edward face each other, William next to his mother. Nana pats the chair next to him.

Come sit. That's so nice of you to bring William his cup too.

Mrs. Silverthorne smiles and William looks down, his face turning a soft girl flush. Yolanda brings around the mashed potatoes. Mrs. Silverthorne piles peas on William's plate. He takes a spoonful, looks sideways at me. The peas fall from his mouth onto his lap. Edward rattles off the ingredients he used for a serum. Bee wings, lizard scales, dead wood, onion peels, vinegar, baking soda, fig peels, garlic powder. William keeps missing the peas, his mouth always moving to look at me with each spoon. I flatten out the potatoes and make a frown face. This makes William stop and watch. Then he

does the same thing but he can't even get the eyes right, his hand going limp making his thumb fall, splat out gravy to his shirt. Mrs. Silverthorne smiles and keeps tipping her glass down her throat. I take our red cups and get up, walk fast into the kitchen. Nana's voice goes low.

More and more like her mother, head strong, head strong.

Yolanda goes out to collect dishes. I see the marble cake slices ready on a plate on the island. The bottle is next to it. I tippy toe to grab its neck. It empties evenly into the two cups. I set them on the ground, pull out the tissue from my pocket. The body has hardened. The legs are fine, even the pointer. So is the bone skin, ribbed or smooth. It's what's inside that matters. I take the body upside down, aim for a cup, the pointers facing up and squeeze. There is a pop, the flesh goes down, an old balloon. Two silver drops fall into the cup. I watch the liquid simmer with wine then drop the scorpion remains into the garbage disposal.

When I push open the door with my back I make sure my eye stays on the cup. Edward shows his paper boat diagrams to Mrs. Silverthorne. He keeps them in a pocket book. One day he plans to add panels for heat wave super power.

Who wants special cake? Asks Nana.

William shoots up his hand, kicks his short legs back and forth against his chair, shoes floating above the ground. Each time he kicks I feel the weak force of his plump muscles. The motion moves my skirt. I put the cup in front of him. Yolanda goes back with the dishes to bring the cake. I raise my cup, hope he'll copy.

At first I think that maybe I switched the cups by mistake, mixed them up. The sweetness is beyond anything I've tasted before. Nana always lets us have wine, but

really it's just water. But this is heavy maple syrup, almost the same as for plum pancakes. It slithers slow down my throat. I gulp and wait. And then I remember I put no water, understand why Mrs. Silverthorne and Nana take only sips. I take another. It's the same sweetness but I'm ready for it. After a few more the surprise is gone. William still hasn't touched his. I feel him watch me, his small breath hanging open. The marble cake comes out. Witch is inside my slice. She cracks a toothy smile. She makes my fork and spoon do a dance, bump bump bump into each other.

Finally after half the cake is smeared on his face, William's hand, crusted with gravy, moves toward his cup. He moves it so slow it does a tadpole wiggle across the table, step by step. When he takes the cup up, Witch disappears and the fork and spoon stop. Now it's my turn to watch. As the wine enters his mouth his eyes open wide. He's filled his cheeks full brim. Some of it trickles out, down his neck. He's forced to swallow, glump glump. I wait. Suddenly his face becomes the deepest flush, ten times before. Mrs. Silverthorne stops her sipping in midair. Edward points and says William ate an extraterrestrial. William starts to cough, goes purple. Mrs. Silverthorne slaps his back with her painted hand. He throws up sweet smelling peas mixed with chocolate. Edward runs to get his serum. Yolanda brings water. Tears start to roll down William's eyes mixing with the pea soup on his plate. More comes out in hiccups. Mrs. Silverthorne shows him how to breathe, taking in and out but still he hacks. Nana comes up and brings William's cup to her nose.

How could you?

Her voice is mean, each word coming out separate and loud. Then she turns back to William, kneels to wipe his mouth. They are all circled around him and I want to cry

now too but can only run. The swinging door hits my legs, my arms. It echoes across the house. The kitchen bounces its island this and that way and I have to make my way around it, bruise my elbows. I run from the rays of the skylights to my room, the tulips flushing out their petals to flap open and close.

On my bed I cocoon, let my tears come out in heaves. When I'm done my body is heavy, tired and washed through. I reach for my toe but there is nothing. It's the same as ever, flat, not even a tiny pain. I hear Mrs. Silverthorne's car back up, break the gravel of the driveway. It whizzes slowly away. Then the crickets begin and a daddy long legs taps at a ceiling corner. Toto is slumped on his banana. And Witch too is silent, asleep, her body heaped against the drain, tucked away from the night sky. The smell of the earth, fertile and crawling beneath is her beauty brew. But I'm not scared anymore, of the way she is. Her shapeless black body, her strange lips kissing cracks. The way she prefers dark to light. I trust her magic and let my eyes close. I see Mum Bunny on her mountain, her eyelashes snow. She flutters them on my cheek. And when she puts her lips on my head, she is warm, as warm as the sun. But the snow howls around us, covers her till she is gone and the coyote pack passes toward day.



## Phone Tag

Hello? He says.

I peg him for thirty with a five o'clock. The kind of guy who graduated from an Ivy and wears those high top sneakers underneath his dress pants and polo. Plus a pencil thin tie. He works in a big open office space on the West Side Highway. Does the computer programming graphics thing for an industry start-up. What industry? Any industry. The kind that hooks him up with sweet happy hour cocktail parties filled with celebrities in fashion houses in honor of the birthday of DJ Dash. That's the kind of guy that says HELLO with a question mark and a cute curt twang. His name is Chad or James or Anders. I like Anders the best.

Hey I found your phone, I think, on the sidewalk, by school, I say.

I'm the kind of girl that you'd never know has a tat of a vine around her thigh that shows off her lean legs with one red rose bud that looks like it twitches if I flex my leg muscles the right way on a sunny day. Course, they make us wear tights to school, black ones that can't be see through at all, at all. Or Mr. Lee points to us as he walks the hallways, an invisible measuring tape at hand to call out, lower that skirt young lady. Mr. Lee has spider vein fingers and laser eyes that zap out any sex we have. How is it that he ever just got engaged? To what shrew I don't know, says Marla, my best girl. He can't even have sex I bet. Just turns out the lights at night chanting pure thoughts and kisses his

virginal bride on the forehead after reading from his new wave bible about sharing your light. At least that's what he reads to us in Religion. Share your light, share your light, generosity and sisterhood. Yawn. Marla, my best girl, doodles Mr. Lee in her bible column. Mr. Lee in a Speedo or naked except for a cowboy hat, or something hilarious like that.

That so, doll? Where you at? He says.

I tell him I'm right outside my school. And never mind the Long Island that came in just there. I know he's from New England. Polo's, lacrosse, and he sips bourbon when he's home with his folks for Christmas. Me? Mom says as long as I tell her, its cool. The tat? She ood and awed. Says it becomes me. That's the way with Mom. Always saying things but I love her still. Just don't get banged up is her thing. That's the way she says it too. Don't be popping babies under my roof using my pay check, she says. She doesn't care a damn either if we drink all her wine when Marla comes over. Mom always dozes off with her nightcap around nine, Minx and Trinx at her feet. Those big Siamese whores snore as loud as a tractor. But Mom's out and we blast Hot 97 to try new moves. The wine makes our cheeks red in the long mirror on my door, and we're two hot girls. Sometimes we call in when DJ Dash is on and ask for the new Lil' Kay, 'cause that makes me hop, the way Marla puts it. One of these days we're going to wait outside the studio and force our way in if we have to, cause that Dash is hot damn, the way Marla puts it.

That right? Hey, doll, you just wait there a bit, okay? I'm going to come by, okay?  
You stay where you are, okay? He says.

He hangs up before I can ask. I figure he means he'll call his phone, obviously. I sit down on the bench that faces our school on the other side of the street. Most of the girls are out by now, a few little tots trailing out with the nannies. It's getting cold and I swing my legs to make the blood flow and rub my hands and wish I'd remembered the mittens. But that's okay. At least I'll look all red flushed cute like I do with Marla when we dance DJ Dash. *Lil Kay all up in it with her ray and the tray of Bacardi and Champagne spray*. I can hear the beat now and in my mind I'm getting real low down to the ground like those girls do on MTV in the dark club when you take one hand in front and just bend, bam. One day we'll get to DJ Dash and show him. Marla makes me pinkie promise and swear. I can't wait to tell Marla too, about Anders. Anders Anders Anders. Maybe he'll even invite me to his cocktail party as a reward for finding his phone. Anders Anders Anders. It rolls off the tongue real smooth kinda like the way I imagine his tongue to be, like the way that the mirror feels all slick and slidey, a water slide. Marla and me practice Frenching when Mom's real good and asleep. Imagine its Mr. Lee, ewww, Marla jokes in between breaths and now thinking of that I can't help but laugh and try not to laugh too loud like a crazy lady on a bench. What would Anders think? No. I gotta look real cute and cool when he comes by. Like this with my legs crossed, back all straight, hair smoothed.

The phone rings.

It's him! But when I pick up there's no one. But he'll know who I am. I'll know who he is. This is the way these things work. This is the way love works. Like the way that Marla says when we're older and in college people just can talk to each other because there is no one around to tell them otherwise and annoying stuff like that. Things just fit. Mom says, don't you go believing those foolish love fool lies they pump into your head in Romance Novel class. You got one chance and one chance only and you better not fuck it up getting knocked up and turning into a down right dirty whore. No miss. Not after all that money I put into you and your school. No missey. Don't you go slutting around on me. But I know Mom, she'll like Anders. She'll see the way I do that he's the chance, he's the chance I got. Like fate put us together right there through this phone.

Doll? It's you right, the sweet girl who got my phone?

He's got on a big North Face bubble coat, black. His face is a small pale face, like a potato that goes down to a pin to a slit. The slit sticks out of the coat and when he sits down next to me the coat goes bloop, like it oozes into him. I can smell him too and it's not Polo or Burberry but a weird damp smell like when Mom washes Minx and Trinx and they shrivel up, all that fur, all that mad fur sunken down. But this isn't Anders at all. This is the wrong place, the wrong person, he must be confused.

No.

My no comes out all small and I know that he knows that I'm lying but I try not to cry because now I can feel him come closer to me and the bubble starts to puff out and rub against my arm. And the cold now is much colder and I wish that Marla was here because Marla would know what to do. Then I hear his voice warm in my ear, feel his breath dig deep into me.

Don't you say no to me girl. I know your stupid rich girl games. Don't you go and cry for Daddy now neither. Daddy's gone. Daddy don't care neither. You just follow me now, all good and quiet. That's right. See that car there, that SUV? That's right, that's where I been watching you. You're cute too you know. Got lucky with you. Not one of those fat bitches you got as friends. True, you a bitch too, but now you're my bitch. That's right. You wipe back those tears. That's right, that's right. No more crying for you.

He opens the door, pushes me in. He makes me sit on his lap in the back seat. There is a driver in front and the car starts to go and I want to scream but there is no air, no atmosphere, no light. And when he pushes me down to the floor and opens his pants, I know that Mom's there watching. Now a whore, a whore, she hisses. But I don't cry. I know that Anders will be there waiting when I get back. He'll wait forever. Anders in

polo, Anders who takes me in his arms and I can even smell the way his hair is. Like sweet mahogany, like college, like something out there that means love.

## Beachhouse

Six Corona's put me out flat against the ocean. I lay face up to the sun, the big hot parch patch of sun, and sink into the old white lounge chair. The kind that goes down or up through clicks of metal teeth. It's so old, older than me. The plastic skin straps are blotted rusty and two or three have peeled away, fallen to leave holes that stick and makes my skin go in, down to the sand. Soft white sand, trillions of grains away and away from the house, out and out till the water. And past the shore, the break of pelican rocks, died white from sea salted bird fury. The rocks make a killed calm for a man made inlet. The sand has the waves instead. Waves of Western Arabian Nights, waves that once held Carey Grant and his Hollywood horses. But there's only ice burg lily plants left now to decorate, and tall billowing weeds that show which way the masts of the sailboats beyond, way out beyond, must move to catch the sly slights of air. The dunes stretch out past the last of the houses and are cut short by the hotel, closed till high season, locked up and boarded. Past the hotel, the power station, and beyond, the marsh preserve, tar stuck and floated with garbage winding to the build up of Ventura.

I spend the day between the kitchen, the cold fridge of Corona's, and the hot-toe sand. I dig my feet into it, make snow angles to fan myself on the lounge. It will be a long summer. There's enough time, with the drawn out early summer, the houses still empty, then high season mid-June, then the wait till school again. Enough time not to worry. Enough time for things to snap back. And the silence that surrounds the wooden, damp walls of the house, the creaking ceiling at night, my parents curtained dark bedroom. The empty shells all around, big, wide, stripped, pink mother of pearl insides

dusty in wicker baskets on shelves, filled with sea glass. And the dusk foghorn with the fishermen boats churning the harbor leeway. They come back now, afternoon. Sea gulls spin their decks vulture style. They swirl in hunger for guts and blood flesh.

I finish a warm bottle, watch the gull whirlwind, then close my eyes, make my toes dig into the dirt, imagine a beach bug worm splatter flat from the force of my feet. When sleep comes, Paulson comes to me through the sun, slips inside the sand with the worms and makes his way up my legs. He mixes in with the clams, the lost shells, the moonlight that paints the glass frosted, green, blue, near black.

Paulson rings bells, three dead center on my head. I feel his hands. He tears apart the crevices of my brain and there he makes his acoustics go down to the left artery of my heart. It's some kind of pain deep and echoed. My body writhes against plastic, moans a dream, unheard.

\*

Paulson is from way down shore, near Ventura, one of those modern high rises that line the coast, spill out the guts of sewage into rough waves that eat away at tall cracked sediment. He goes to school out east, but we meet one night over spring break at the jetty bar. Some of the girls from school live around there. We go some Saturday's for the special, two Mai Tai's and one fish taco. The shipping lane out front brings Russian tankers, long freight boats of pristine cars that span the meridian. The bar always filled with dull, dumb, drum drones, and the deep honks of the tankers. And the first thing that catches that night is Paulson. He's got a loop silver earring in one ear and smokes his cigarette in little puffs, holds it thumb to fore finger. I like the way his hair ties in the back, rubber band, and they way that we drink our beers in unison, one after the other. At



his place, the elevator zooms thirty floors to a dim lit hallway with pictures of catamarans and ten-foot swordfish.

“Oysters are relics of souls,” he says. His parents have a vat full of them, lemon wedges at hand and sparkled white wine.

“And spumante the secret,” he adds. The long glass vials fill us, finish out the urchin’s we’ve sucked.

Paulson makes me watch him line up three straight, thin, corridors. He uses his card, and licks his fingers to adjust width and length. He offers me a hundred cylinder.

“You go first,” I say.

When he’s done he leans back in the white, leather love chair and I feel his body loose against mine. It does nothing to me but make me stare at the oysters, slimy slithers, amoeba replicas.

We kiss against the railing of the porch outside, feel the ocean fathoms, way bellow. We lick our lips and the wind blows up my skirt, where I let him put his hand, and where he lets me play round and round with his loop earring.

In his bed, his white coarse bed, we hear the waves crash. Like them we are angry, mean. I let him suck an oyster off my breast and when he comes I hold my hands so that they don’t shake. It’s quiet then, no foghorn, only the water, wave after wave.

“Are you ever scared of them,” I ask.

“Of what?”

He smells mollusk that mixes in with his wet underarm.

“What is that you wear,” I say.

I put my nose against a deep cut collarbone. In the dark his earring shines and his chest is bare to mine, skin-to-skin sticky salt.

“It’s a green bottle with a horse rider,” he says.

I think of Carey Grant, the ice burg dunes, and worms that crawl their way into the fog.

Two months later, Paulson comes to visit.

“I’m coming,” he calls me. I can hear the cars on the highway.

We haven’t spoken for months, since that night.

“Is that okay,” he says. He puffs his words out fast from a cigarette.

“Sure,” I say.

When he arrives the fog has just cleared and the sun begins June. The houses around still wait, shuttered, not for long.

“Hear the fog horn,” I tell him. I wait by the door. It wails even in the sun, till the very last drop leaves the coast.

“How do you stand it,” he says.

He has an old Thunderbird red convertible.

“The top doesn’t slide back, ever,” he says, kisses me, with his arms behind his back. He pulls them out when we’re done, two bottles of spumante.

“And your folks?” he says, looking in behind me past the open door.

“Hawaii, time-share months. And yours?”

“You know, come and go. Shall we?” Paulson waves a bottle, takes me by the waist and comes in.

We spend the afternoons dizzy out on the sand, or as one on the lounge, plastic strands cutting our calves. Before the fishermen come back, spit out intestines to the hoards of gulls, we get naked and let the quiet blows of dunes fuel run around. It becomes hot after, sand stuck to our gums and we run to the shore to see the boats close, the water, too cold. The Pacific strangles our ankles.

At night, Paulson lines my bedside stand. We fill and fit ourselves into a cocoon on my twin. It creaks when we move. I tug at his earring, curl into his fold, let his green bottle dye my insides seaweed.

“Here’s a secret,” he says the first night, when we change for bed.

He fishes out the green bottle from his duffle bag and a small bag of orange pills.

“This, you know,” he says, pats some under his arms, puts the bottle back in the bag. It has a gold cap and the horseman flares wavy hair.

“And these, only one, no more, brings nightmares.”

We swallow one each.

Each night we swallow and he is calm, never moves, limbs forever stuck against one another in a self-made womb.

“And how do you stand it,” he says, each night, puts a pen cap in each ear. But I let the foghorn go on and the worms claw through sand. I tap his earring, twirl the pen caps deep inside tissue.

“I like that,” he says, his breath a high sleepy warm.

\*

Now when he rings, the bells, the pain, I wake up hungry. There is a mirage that goes along with the dunes, bounces out and out from iceberg tops. I’ve missed the boat,

the gulls, and with the sun out past far right, sunset won't be much more. I watch the mirage hesitate the air, ripple when a gull paddles through. Paulson is still here I know, inside sleeping, waiting, quiet, patient. I throw on my T-shirt and start to wade through the sand, toward the long stretched out vision. The houses stare at me, blank. They whisper behind my back after I pass, their windows unoccupied, their structures solid and hard from years of salted winds. The mirage remains untouchable, just beyond my fingers, ripples against ice burgs.

“Yoo hoo!” It's a man's voice. It comes from a house, falls down flat to the sand that jumps up with each step.

“You hoo! Hey, wait up.”

I keep on. The mirage won't wait.

“Hey!” He is right behind me, I know.

“Hey! Stop!”

I turn around. He's shirt-less, tanned from outdoor work, Bermuda shorts, shades he's propped up on his head, a big, stupid grin.

“Baby, listen. I work up there on that house,” he points behind him. “Fixing the roof. Saw you down below. Had to come say hello. That okay, right?”

“Sure,” I say. He thumbs with his phone and keeps on the grin. His fingers are large, plump caterpillars.

“You from here, I guess,” he says.

“Yeah. Back that way.”

“Say, what do you say to a drink later? Maybe you can give me your number?”

His caterpillars tap eagerly. They are black at the under tips, dirty, lustful.

“Why don’t you just come by now,” I say. The sun cuts the mirage, erases it with its beams now zoomed nearer to the sand. It hits his glasses. They turn red and widen his happy face.

“Yeah baby, that’s great,” he says. “Show me the way.”

“Don’t need to lock up?”

“I’ll stop by after,” he winks. He makes a sand storm when he walks. I run ahead, show the way.

I take off my T-shirt, wait for him on the lounge. The pelican rocks are the whitest this time of day, lava flows of crusted excretion.

“I like that bikini, baby,” he says when he makes it, the clouds of sand dying when he stops.

“You got this place to yourself?”

“House sitter. Make yourself comfortable,” I say, point to the lounge. “I’ll be back. Beer?”

“Sure thing, baby.” When I’m up, he stretches out on a lounge with a groan, grins up through red glasses, props his arms behind his head.

Inside, away from the sun, the sand, the walls creak. The shells open, gawking, forever. I wait a bit before unlocking the door to my room. I take the key from the door ridge. But all is calm, silent, no reason to panic.

“You don’t mind do you Paulson?” I say, very softly, when I’m inside.

Everything is the same. Nothing has changed from the hours that passed out on the sand. But I don’t look at my bed, instead only at the carpet, my bare grainy feet that make the way to Paulson’s duffle bag. Mollusk hangs in the air.

“It’s only for you,” I whisper. “So you can wake, so I can wait, for you.” I grab the green bottle then go back out, gently, and lock.

Outside, he’s taken off his shorts and all that’s left is a tan hide against the backdrop of the rust and blue torn boxers. I sit on top of him, cover his eyes with a hand, dig my toes into the sand, know that the worms wait down below to inject their talons.

“Hey baby, I like it. Got me a beer?” I cover his mouth with my other hand.

“Don’t speak, don’t open,” I say, take my hands slowly off his face. “I have a present for you.” I open the green bottle, watch the gold cap fall into the sand and ignite with a sudden thunderbolt of sun. I pour, rub into his chest, inhale deep.

“What is that baby, smells something good.”

“Shh, magic potion,” I say and spread out on his body. “Paulson, Paulson.”

“What’s that baby? Come here.” He snaps open my bikini top. Two gulls make a figure eight to the side. The plastic creaks in rhythm. The sun is alive, the worms hungry for more.

\*

“I have to go tomorrow,” Paulson says.

It’s night again, and we’re so tan that we shine under the lamplight. Even our gums are browned, make our teeth gleam white with the mucus dripping down our drainpipes, a constant rush.

“Why?” I say.

“Summer school,” he says, turns around to crouch by his bag and measure out a pill each. I stare up at the ceiling. It starts to crack, bit by bit, a trade wind from the ocean blowing onward, out and out. He walks over, bends, lets his mollusk self, his sea salt

breath feed me a pill from tongue to tongue. I let him kiss me, close my mouth, but don't swallow. The pill fizzes against saliva. He walks out to go to the bathroom. I hear the water running hot and strong, the way he likes it. I grind the pill to dust in my molars and get up, a sudden rush, and find the small bag of orange in his duffle bag. I pour out four then dole out two glasses of spumante in the kitchen, make one just for Paulson. It can't be that bad, just enough to make him stay.

"More spumante? Why not," he says back in bed. We cheer and down. I put my body against his and feel his breath rush out, a mint taste of toothpaste, a clean taste of his raw body, a taste of sea. The ceiling groans and starts the foghorn.

"You forgot the pen caps," I say to his already shut eyes, his slow up and down chest. I take them from the tabletop where they lie and wind them slowly into his ears. When I'm done I take his earring between my teeth and want his blood, his soft lobe.

\*

"You have to go," I say, when we are done. I get off him and throw him his shorts, throw on my T-shirt.

"Come on baby, can't we cuddle. Or how about that beer."

"The wind's picked up," I say, look out to the break line where two catamarans start to unfurl.

"Can I use your bathroom at least?"

"Go ahead, inside to the left," I say. Some pelican's perch on the rocks. We watch the boats.

When he's done I'm in the same spot and he comes with his caterpillar hands, starts to rub my back but I push him off.

“Aw, baby,” he still grins. “Hey nice Thunderbird you got out back.”

“Thanks,” I say. “You should go.”

“Let me just see your room, or something, baby.”

I walk inside, shut the patio door. He stands for a moment, strains to see through the dark glass of the house. I watch, my heart hung still, till his clouds take him away, gone, back to where he came from.

The fridge buzzes and a long creak starts to break apart the house. The hunger, the pain, comes back and to make it stop, to stop the bells I take out the spumante, just a glass or so left on the bottom. It feels fine once it's in me and let's me be for a while to watch the catamarans' beyond, big billows now. They twirl themselves past the break and toward a deep obtuse solar ray. I begin to sweat and run into my room. Paulson is still there, still, silent, somber. I rush to my bed and pull out the pen caps from his ears. When I put them in my mouth his wax sticks to my teeth and I bite down to suck out all that seeped out of him.

When I cocoon against him, his mollusk is pungent, rotted, beautiful. dream of oysters that slide down my throat, tentacles of urchins that itch me till I'm red, and clam shells that shut our bodies within.



## Best Friends

Valentine got pumped out of boarding school, just cause she got sick of it, she says, and we meet second semester sophomore year when she moves back to the city, a last minute addition to our twenty-girl class. I'm almost out with the other girls by that point, bored, ready to move on, and me and Valentine latch, spend days skipping, smoking in the park, wine coolers out of paper bags. The climax sort of, what really hinges us, is Florida, spring break, and its humidity. Valentine's dad is some big hotel mogul, so he hooks us up with a too vacant hotel in Clearwater for our grand senior finale. We're only there for four days, lock ourselves up in the Hilton room the last night, sick of three lazy days on the beach doing nothing but read. It's the last straw, and we go crazy. We scam who knows what booze with bad fakes from the corner mart, steal a deck of tarot cards from a tourist Zen shop, and pound pop rap. Plus there's the small hand held. It's really for film class, to record at whim our avant-garde not yet realized gaze of genius. Valentine still has the tape, to black mail me I'm pretty sure.

Show me your thong, I say to her, my voice behind the lens.

Valentine turns her drunken beautiful blond mane around and slowly lowers her spandex mini. Like always she is perfect, made for the camera. Unlike me, always ending up with a crooked smile in pictures, or sunken eyes. But not Valentine. Like on the Florida tape where she's got on a dark thong and her skin is so white, like marble against the grainy night coloring.

Ouch, I yell, kick up some of the cards strewn this way and that among multi-colored Goldfish. You can see my neon pump move out to the bottom left of the picture.

Three cards, three goldfish, Death, Love, Hate, or something, go flying up about the soft glare of the computer screen in the backdrop pumping out the soundtrack of synth drums and whiney chorus lines.

After the tarot card strip tease we sober up a bit bored and make it out into the humid Florida night. I put on a blue silky thing of Valentine's, and she's got on my pink flowery halter-top. She looks better, more toned, thinner. We march onward with some sort of mission in mind. We'd heard the music the other nights from the beach bar down a way and balance our way there street side, careful not to get our heels stuck in unlucky sidewalk cracks. This is when a red Chevy pulls up.

You girls need a lift?

We eye them. It's two boys, the one at the wheel with a red baseball hat skewed sideways and the other in a blue button down and blue eyes all sizzling, a cigarette he dangles off the side of the passenger ride. He cracks the back seat door, offers a pack of P-Funks and we slide in, take a smoke each. The humidity slides against our thighs that stick already to the leather seats.

Jack, Josh, Valentine, Me.

We do the meet and greet. When Jack rev's up and takes off, the humid air sticks our hair into vixen waves. Valentine takes my hand and we interchange elbows so that we drag off each other's hand and it feels all right, the buzz coming on.

That's how we meet Jack and Josh, end up at the beach bar where we share a big thing of too sour margarita punch. Our shoes fall off and we run back barefoot with them through the sand to the Hilton, big and lit and messy, our suite.

Scene two, Valentine captures me and Josh the half-demon supermodel making out. I'm wearing the skimpy sheer blue thing that on me just hangs plain. But he has these blue eyes and that's the way I'd like to remember it. Valentine zooms in all heavy. We're on the bed and his tongue is in me and mine in his and Valentine just goes crazy back and forth from a large angle of the room down to the tarot fish floor, back up to the unmade king bed down to our mouths convalescing.

In the end (off-camera) I'm in the bathroom with Josh and outside in the room, Valentine is getting a loud orgasm on the floor from Jack with his red backwards hat. The kind of orgasm I can never have.

It's okay? Josh asks me.

I'm propped on the sink, skirt up. Something about him getting in trouble for a seventeen year old. But I'm eighteen. There is a half eaten cold crusty pepperoni pie in the bathtub and I'm hungry. Valentine starts to scream when Josh zooms in and closes his pretty eyes.

The last Florida footage (scene three) is the next morning on the beach. It's a nice beach, clean white, lukewarm water. We get up very early and sleep it out till noon on towels with the sound of the waves. The ice cream cart wakes us up.

I smell drunk girl and ass, he says. We glare. He's a scrawny kid with sticks for legs that come out under Bermuda shorts and just barely make the pedals of the golf cart. He slow swirls nice and smooth around us.

Stop it, skeez, says Valentine. She whips out the hand held, zooms into his face. His cheeks are pock marked. Smile! Valentine commands. Ice cream sticks out a thin

snake tongue then zooms away. Valentine switches to me. I'm stretched out lazy in a golden brown leopard print two piece.

How you feel sexy? She asks.

When she focuses closer, going from my legs to my face, I look pretty all right, bathroom pizza and all, though even from her voice I know that she was more tan, her bathing suit fit better. I don't say anything but turn my face away and that's it. The tape goes to blackness, the end. It can be dubbed, that last part, or maybe just subtitles that sort of fade away and say something like, what she meant to say (meaning me) is that she hurts a bit, you know, and that there's a bit of blood, deep, almost copper, and do you think, dear Valentine, that ice cream boy sells Pena Colada's? Do you think, pretty Valentine, that it'll be okay?

\*

Valentine didn't lose it that night but does right before she comes to Paris. She calls me from London to tell me this. Some guy named Gravis, a Brit. We've drunk our fish bodies through a year of college and the summer is Europe. Our insides are still empty enough to merge into one big juggernaut of liquor friendly love. A year of too much apart, her in the west coast, me stuck up state, cold and grey and small. But we manage to get into summer exchange that's nothing about knowledge, really. She takes the train into Paris from London for a weekend. I wait for her in my five flights up maid's room off Avenue Victor Hugo. The days become one of the blue late ones that drag on. I stretch out on the ceiling pull down bed. The place has a small washroom, an even smaller kitchen hole thing, one small closet and just enough space for a little table. But

it's nice enough, looks out on a courtyard where people have lines to dry clothes and flowerpots on sills and the occasional cat face that perches and watches while I watch it.

The summer here is like the city summer I'm used to, that sticky heat with air condition boxes pissing and the garbage perfume and the trucks with their fumes that wait jammed together in processions down tiny, long streets that lead to nowhere, or to a river, or a park, or an unknown store with a lonely man at the counter. My street is rue Leonard Da Vinci, off Avenue Victor Hugo, and since I've been here it's been lonelier than I've ever known before. I never knew loneliness, really. Back home there was school always, groups of girls I could bounce off of, boys, mixers, sale days at Henry's with mom, brunch with dad at Nord, and of course Valentine in the end. And college was okay too, class, and dorms, and enough nights to call Valentine half drunk or the morning after and say it's almost noon, and his roommate walked in, would you know, how awful, a head ache, the leaves are turning yellow and rotten, and she would always know because we shared the same stories. But in Paris I get lost. The French University system exists on hallways filled with butts and chipped blue paint and old, tired British teachers who can do nothing but roll their eyes. And with the mean tongues and the mean women on the metro who glare, the only way to be is silent, like now. The silence of the room takes on the rush of the cars that whirl the Trocadero. Next door I can hear the TV that's on and a man's now and then cough. His cigarette smoke seeps through the floorboard pipes into mine.

Yooooooooooooooooo!

Yooooooooooooooooo!

A voice calls from somewhere down below. I look at the courtyard but it's just cat there in the window and a drooping sunflower he stares at on his sill.

Yooooooooooooooooo!

This can only be her, I know. I run down the five flights and open the large carriage door, heavy as ten bar bells. She's standing in front of the door when I open, squeezes herself in.

Well, hello, I say, let the door go to slowly clank itself in place.

Couldn't remember your number, Valentine says, drops a leather duffle bag on the marble lobby.

Fancy, she says, looks up at the fake Venetian fresco on the ceiling.

I live in the maid's quarters, I say, start to walk up the stairs, let her pick up behind me. She looks good, a cute little box cut dress that's too short and makes her thighs look super tanned. She's got her hair done straight blond again, or maybe it's the sun and summer. I know it does that, goes green in chlorine, real light in heat.

That's a cute bag, I call behind me, skipping two steps at a time. Hey, you need help? I stop and look back.

It's okay, she says. Valentine's lugging it in front with two hands. The weight makes her lean back, props her boobs real perky from underneath the dress.

I got it with dad in Italy, this real cute luggage store.

So cute, I say. Italy? Vacay?

Yah, I had some free time this past month.

She's made it up to me so I turn back around and run up the rest. I leave the door open and wait for her sprawled on the ceiling bed. When it's really dark it gets hotter for

some reason and I kick around the cotton sheet with my bare feet. This makes it like there's a fan there, though there's not.

Man! Some stairs! I hear the duffle drop on the floor. It's carpet, the kind at the bottom of cabs, so it makes the thud more dense and impounded.

Sounds like rocks, I say.

Stuff, you know, decisions. Hey, you got a bathroom?

Sure, I say. Right there, that door right by you. I haven't looked down to Valentine yet, but I know that's where she's got to be. There are only so many spaces to be in the room. The TV next door is still going and the lights now on in the widows of the courtyard outside make candlelight cut outs.

When she's out she climbs up to me and sits to face me.

It hurts, Valentine whispers, takes her head to the left to make a blond streak fly away from the cheek it landed on.

What's that, I say, prop up. Our faces are close now and I can smell what she's wearing, a mildewed floral type thing.

It still hurts, you know, she says.

Oh.

It just happened, we were drunk. She blushes. Gravis, Travis, Mavis. His name rolls through my head. I don't say anything.

He took me to his parents place last weekend. They went on some golf vacation. They have these amazing wooden counter tops, and the powder room. Mirrors all around... We did it all over.

Good?

She shrugs. Just hurts, you know. Valentine's hair moves with her face, sways when she shrugs, hops when she whispers. Every time she moves I smell the mildew scent.

You poor thing. I put a hand on her shoulder. I can feel a bone there, right down from her collar. You want some wine, or something?

Yes, please. Plus, these help. She opens up a fist. There are three pills inside. Excedrin, extra strength.

I pour some white wine, cut up a baguette and spread it with herb butter.

My Parisian feast, I say, bring it up to her on the bed. She takes a whole glass to put the pills down. We lie down, let the wine seep between us. She falls asleep soon, in her box dress, in her mildew and I try to copy the shape of her body in the opposite direction so that we're the same again, together, with the TV in the background and the Trocadero forever going. And for the first time in a long time I feel what it is, Valentine and me.

\*

We wake up late morning. The TV's back on and the cough and the smell of cigarette. I make a pot of coffee. The cat's back on his perch and the sky is back bright and blue. Valentine unfolds, stretches herself every which way on the bed, lets a foot dangle down. She's painted her toes black and has an anklet that's gold. It's gold with a small pearl hanging. It shows off the thin smoothness of her leg that unwinds down to her feet. I tug at it a bit and this wakes her.

Coffee?



She sits up and takes a cup I hold up to her. I watch her from the small table. I've got no chairs so the table does the same job. Valentine's hair wakes up messy, blond whips sticking out every which way, but somehow it works.

We make ourselves up to go out. Valentine unloads the duffle. She's got it stuffed with shoes and scarves and big necklaces and it all falls out around the carpet.

Can I wear that dress? I ask, point to the box one she's still in.

Sure. She strips it off. She's got no bra on and her breasts are so white compared to the rest of her. You can see the bikini tan strips going up to her neck. There's a mirror above the kitchen sink and when I stand on the table to look at myself, the dress is tighter on me. I can smell Valentine's mildew mixed in with a groggy whiff of sleep.

Walking outside the sun hits our faces, cuts deep down past our dark shades. Valentine's are these vintage purple-rimmed cat eyed ones and make her cheekbones just jut. Men turn to look at her as they pass. Somehow she's managed to really blend in, a French girl, all that style and ease and haughtiness, she's got it down. Plus she knows where she's going, takes us to this café off one of the big boulevards past the Champs.

Dad's favorite, she says. The best onion soup! We order two and start a round of mimosas. The champagne right off soothes out the glare of the blue sky around Valentine. She sits in front of me with this halo around her blond head, a short brown shirt, tube top, boobs, her tan legs crossed, shoe dangling off those black toes and that anklet.

Hey, how you feeling? She's so relaxed and fine.

Oh. She rolls her eyes. She fishes around in her bag, pulls out the bottle of Excedrin, rattles it. Pop three every now and then and it's fine, she says. Plus who can go

wrong with Mimosa's? She takes her glass up and finishes it in one go, raises a hand for a refresh.

Can I try? I point to the bottle she's left on the table. Valentine nods, pushed it over.

And it does soften everything up, what with the warmth of the soup and the after taste of the Mimosa's. We walk along the Seine all the way to Place de la Concorde.

Jolie jolie jolie jolie! Little men hiss at Valentine. We hold hands and skip. The sun is very warm and won't go away and we don't want it to.

Stay, stay, stay, jolie, jolie, jolie. We sing nonsense.

At the Place, we get lost in back streets that swirl around. The Place dictates all around it, makes everything pivot on this focal point. Finally we're tired and stop in front of a small boutique. Everything in the display is blue. A blue coat, blue boots, blue hoop earrings, blue cocktail gloves.

Wonderful! Valentine exclaims. She props her purple cat eyes on her head and we walk in, a bell jingling behind us. A girl sits at the counter, barely looks at us, mumbles some sort of hello. Valentine grabs ten dresses, all shades of blue and I manage to pick out a pair of fancy shoes, see through plastic blue with peep toes and tall rectangle heels. I think about how good they would look on Valentine, with her black toes and gold anklet pearl and tan tones and all. She's in the dressing room awhile. I pretend to stare at the jewelry display. The girl does not look up from the magazine she reads. I can see from even across the room that she has blue sparkle eye shadow all over her eyes, like a small masquerade mask.

How do you like? Valentine almost falls out of the dressing room. She's wearing one of those eighties prom dresses, real short, with blue polka dot taffeta on the skirt and shiny material on the bust, the kind that kinda changes with the light. She looks good, of course.

Try these. I hand her the shoes. She puts them on. They raise her high, a walking goddess of blue glory.

Jolie, jolie, the girl says, looks up, doesn't even notice me.

Yes, Jolie. I agree, we all agree.

The girl hands us a card after Valentine pays. Some club, a dance party, disco lights, popping bottles, the works.

We'll be there! Valentine runs out, bag swinging at hand, cat eyes back on her face. I try to keep up. We make it to the metro and slump onto seats.

Want more? Valentine rattles out the Excedrin. We take three each and she puts her pretty head on my shoulder. Three women glare across from us, middle aged, very finely applied lipstick. But I don't care. I cross my legs the way Valentine has them, so that we match. Her mildew, erased by the day on the dress, is now back with her body on mine. I wonder what she sees when she sleeps, if the world moves her along, surely, always, somewhere way back in her mind.

\*

Valentine walks in the club one stalk of sexy and it feels right being by her side, being in her awesome light. I've got on this tiny red half shoulder dress she has that really sticks to all the ins and outs of my body.

You pull that off better, more umph, says Valentine, her way of saying I'm fatter, but whatever. At this point we've been popping the Excedrin at least four times since morning, what with the mimosas, some kir royals at happy hour, a long cat nap, and charged chill vodka shots right before we hit it. Paris and her stupid happy boulevard face is filled with club kids pretending American, hustlers in dark corners, North Africans who man the 24/7 internet cafés, the pimpsters in their technoed out cat calling cars. And the club we land in is full of the best breed of all. That Parisian relic of the flaneur with the suede snappy shoes and the propped polo and a tie around sweater, on the neck. Or is it pretend American again? The bouncer opens wide for Valentine and her taffeta wonder woman get up and I slither in right by her. There are boys with white gloves lining a red carpet half spiral staircase up to where the music pumps itself out, a house version mix of a nineties Madonna song. The boys have some sweet type of fizzy pink stuff in shot sized glasses and we take one from each as we go up the stairs. Then the doors open and a flood of lavender strobe light pulls us in. It's all jumping. The dance floor rotates and around it are black plush couches, low tables. The ceiling is a dome of glass and all the glass around, a prism. Paris glows below, the Eiffel off to one side, the avenues merging, tiny car specters that move like ants. On the couches sit the guys with the neck sweaters and girls stand stalk like near them, a glass in hand, a gaze that looks through the glass to nowhere. Legs are long, fingers finely painted, and Valentine fits right in. She takes my hand and we begin to spin real smooth with Madonna's voice that takes on a stuttered beat till it all explodes and we're going miles, miles.

Somehow we manage to stop. Sweat sticks me to the red dress. I'm hot and I feel Valentine's hand, slimy warm, drag me. We fall onto a plush couch. The song changes to

one about eternity, or hell in heaven, and the pink stuff, that fizzy sweet thing we ate so much of at the door flows on the table. We stick out our tongues and drench our faces, our mouths.

Isn't it beautiful, Valentine says, does a wavy hand thing over Paris.

Oh, we have some American ladies, a man's voice drawls. Three of them sit there across from us. They've got the sweaters, cigars. The one who spoke leans closer, edges his way around so that he's right next to Valentine. Another one moves to me. The third one leans back, eyes us, makes a signal for bottle service. I can see Valentine's sweat gleam off her forehead from the lavender lights and it makes her look fresh, dewy, doused in a sort of eternal shower of fantastic moisture. The man next to her leans forward, takes a sweaty strand off her face. I look away. The sweater next to me whips back his hair a bit, gives me a glass.

You like party? He leans in with a hand under his chin. He's got a wedding band on, defined knuckles with black hair.

Sure, I say, sure we do.

I look back at Valentine and she's got her mouth locked to the guy. The third one is gone, and when I feel a bite at my neck I don't flinch. The lights become golden and small sparkles start to fall from the sky where a moon is half finished, half dark.

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The moon carries us out into the night and somehow we end up with the two sweaters in an apartment. The third sweater greets us in a dark hallway and we follow him into a small living room with a wet bar, lots of pillows, an entire collection of glass

decanters square and round and cylindrical filled with whiskey, many types. The whole room smells of whiskey and the faces in front of me get cut into pieces through the decanters they peer through. Yellow ghosts with ten eyes stare at me. I stumble to a bathroom nearby with wallpaper that is fake Egyptian hieroglyphics, a man who straddles a woman, one of those cryptic acts uncovered in pyramids. In the mirror I have three black marks on my neck and they merge to make the man and woman in the signs that surround me. My red dress is blotted with watermarks that go around and around my entire body. When I run out, Valentine, her sweater, the third sweater, my sweater, they're all gone and I'm too drunk. I swig out of a decanter, let the whiskey burn my throat up to my eyes and lay down on the pillows.

It's only when she screams do I realize I fell asleep. It's only once that scream, but piercing and shrill enough to splice through the air. I try to find her but the only other door in the place is knocked and there is no noise anywhere now. Silence and my pounding fists on the door. When I get too tired, my palms red, chafed, I wait tucked into the door crack, try to squeeze my body there, try to see through the space, the black, the quiet death I feel deep inside.

When he opens up, he fixes his sweater on his neck, gives me a pinch on the cheek.

You friend, she's tired, I think, he says, walks away.

I creep into the room. It's pitch dark, but I make out an unmade bed, a window covered with a blind. Valentine is on the bed, her blue dress down to her waist, the taffeta torn, her hair wet from the hours of sweat. She is beautiful even like this, even with the destruction of her dress. The clear blue pumps are still on her feet, her perfect feet, but

the anklet is gone, torn off, lost. I get on the bed and slowly lay myself on her. She is braless, a nakedness that was not clear in the dark but that I can now feel underneath me. It's her soft, mildew nakedness and I want to cry, want to sink into her.

Valentine, Valentine, I say. Her eyelids flutter.

Hmm, she says, barely.

Valentine, let's get up, let's get out of here. Her breath smells like rotten whiskey and tobacco. I take her shoes off, lift her thin waist off the bed, fix back her dress. She is so light, pliable, weightless. But I know I can't cry, not yet, not till she is safe with me, only me. The door waits open. There's the dark hallway, another door, and then we are outside. I hold Valentine by her waist, her shoulders. Her bones slump into me, into the street.

Valentine! Valentine! I'm yelling now. Her eyes flutter back, and she opens up her mouth, opens then closes, like a fish in air. I lean her against a car on the side. The moon is still above but it's moved way to the side by now so that it hits the window shield in an off slant, illuminates Valentine's hair from the dark sweat back to a shade of blond, her pretty strands. But her lips are white, whiter than the moon. I feel them with my finger, and then with my lips, cracked, dry. And kissing her, I let myself cry, finally. Cry because of her torn taffeta, her lost anklet, her blue beauty, and because of the way we've let each other go. An car alarm goes off down the block and far off the sound of a siren spins away, that false version of the city siren back home, the inverted sound of where we've come from, a sound that I can no longer remember.

## Xmas Ball

My Xmas Ball dress is the best. Not like Sophomore Prom, where five other girls had the same number from Bendell's. That one fit snug all the right curves, plus the super sequence sea foam green and low dip cleavage wow. I wore that one with super high super strappy gold BCBG's. But still. It was a mess. Like Hey I Like Your Dress, Bitch. We all changed for the after party. But this Xmas thing. Let me tell you. Theme is Fairy White Winter Ball, so course the aim is to get a big billowy badass big time dress. And Madre, way back in antiquity, had this thing for collecting vintage lace. And one time, she was at the Armory Auction and there was this dress and Madre was in love, instantly, and so she got it. For twenty bucks. That's it.

And How Pretty You Look, Madre says when I'm about ready to call the doorman for a cab.

Was Meant For My Princess, Madre says.

I kiss Madre two cheeks, promise I'll be home in the morning, promise I'm sleeping at Yani's and run to the elevator.

Watch the Lace, Madre says behind me. I know when I'm gone she'll lay down with the Fat Cat, a Marlboro and Kahlua.

Don't Forget Face Cream, are Madre's last words with the close of elevator doors. Madre swears by this secret Andalusia recipe of petroleum oil, straight, dosed on the face night long with moist cotton balls. She makes me pack it in the backpack I've got. I stock it with a change of clothes over a flask of Kahlua. Me and Yani, she steals Saki and me Kahlua.



School's only five blocks down Fifth, but with The Dress, Madre says I need a cab. I make it in no time and go straight down to the Slump, what we call our basement dungeon lounge. Yani's not there yet, but Hoff and Nez are. Hoff is large and Nez, namesake cause, got a big shnozz and a uni-brow. I slump my pack by the lockers, pull out the flask, flounce off Madre's mink she's let me borrow. It matches the winter theme to tee.

Lotsa lace there, Nez says.

Looks like a Queen, know what I mean. Hoff and Nez high five, dork salute.

Do a turn, Nez says, and I do. See, it's got a pink bodice, tight to waist. And then that lace. It cascades down, one white ripple upon the next down to my white too tall Prada geisha strappys.

Want some? I take a sip, pass them my flask. Even though, Hoff and Nez are alright.

Makes you look like you got's boobs, Hoff says after a wallop guzzle.

It's the pink pin-up, Nez says, takes it next.

What you guys got? And I don't mean their dresses. One is aubergine suburban, the other glitter hell Motel 6.

Colt can you? Hoff points to two sixties by the vomit couch they sit on. We call it the vomit couch cause that's what it smells like.

Too cool? Hoff downs the rest of a Colt, gets up, offers her arm to Nez. I follow them out the dungeon. We make our way up ten thousand marble steps to the ballroom. Back in the day, our school was a mansion. Now it's a convent. Pine trails the banisters, red ferns stand on ledges. There's this season caroling coming from the ballroom.

When we're there, I let Hoff and Nez get lost. The ballroom entrance is open, reeks of an empty DJ ambiance. The dates, the boys, wait banister lined. There's the table with nametags, headed by MegD super slut class prez. Sure enough, Cromwell's there.

Bonjour, Cromwell says, gent bows, hand behind back, and I curtsy dip deep. Cromwell's got big, green, lover eyes, ears that go felt pink when he's got too much to drink, and this crazy mouth when he's high that makes him look like a yak on play dough crack. He's just goofy, done in for, a big stuffed animal who won't ever have to work it. He's from our brother school. We met at the summer school mixer. Spoiled rotten.

MegD hands us name tags spelled in super festive red glitter ink to match her glitter red nails and her glitter red lips and her glitter red eye lids and her glitter red bad puff perm. She flutters up at Cromwell and I can see him do his grin flirt back at her. Yani pops up behind me.

Coffee stain, she says. She's got on a white negligee type thing and those feather slippers except for fancy shoes. And white fake eyelashes. Cromwell brushes two fingers through them, the lashes.

Damn stain took forever and right on my crouch, Yani says. We decide to go into the ballroom. DJ is alone, a big disco ball that cuts out snowflakes on the floor. White balloons that hang on the ceiling. Mirrored walls painted with silhouettes of fairies. Hoff and Nez stand by the punch bowl, acned dates at tote, stuff faces with what looks like marshmallows. Some other girls stand around, try to talk through the cheesy rock holiday classics. The crowd, the girls that matter, won't come till late, drunk, stay one minute for face then bounce with their dark dates. No stuffed animals for those girls. Cromwell

holds my hands and we pull out and whirl. I can see my dress in the mirrors. The lace flaps, does an uppity thing like air plane wings. Yani runs through our dance, breaks it.

Think the punch got punch? Crownell says, flutters Yani's lashes one more time.

I know I do, I say. Yani rolls her eyes.

Show me where, Cromwell says into my ear, squeezes my waist line.

Don't finish all the punch with Shnoz and Crew, I tell Yani, but she just rolls her eyes. She doesn't have a date. She just broke up with that goon and we all know she got broken up over it, but she won't say.

I make Cromwell hold my shoes. One two three. We race past MegD and past the ferns and down and down till we've reached bottom, the dungeon, the deep dark throne.

Welcome to the lair, I tell Cromwell. We lock the door and fall on the vomit couch.

It's the couch, I say.

What is?

The vomit.

Oh man, says Cromwell. I take off my super fantastic lace wonderland heaven dress and it falls right off and Cromwell, it takes him a good minute to take off his slacks and jacket and tie but when he's done he pushes me onto the vomit couch again.

We slide off halfway through and end on the linoleum and when we're finished that fake floor feels fine, cold smoothie. I can feel my heart pump right into, right deep into the mansion's bones and Cromwell's breaths are short and deep, a little stuffed dog. I stretch my left to feel my limbs stretch and when I do this it's like my uterus pops bubbles into the air. It's all very silent all of a sudden and Cromwell holds his breath and

I close my eyes to see the bubbles. The pink of my bodice becomes a rose, my palms stretch out into the veins of the rose, Saint Nick is Cromwell with the same pink felt tips. Central Park trees on Fifth spread out branches frosted candy cane. A pink octopus is stuck in one, three legs chopped off.

What you doing there? I can hear Cromwell above me. He has risen from the bones.

Saint Nick baby bubbles skeleton heads, I say.

Got that flask of yours? I can hear him button buttons into holes. I put my legs back together and wake up.

Zip me, I say to Cromwell, go back into lace. We share the rest of Madre's Kalhua.

Delinquents, open up. It's Lale, I know her grainy voice from too many cloves. Cromwell greets her with his green gorgeous grin.

That some of Madre's Spanish homespun? Lale glances my way, pushes Cromwell aside. Her side kicks pick at their nails. Lale's got on this Betsy Johnson tutu type thing, all tight ivory velvet to her perksters. Her bridesmaids are in black with too French tips.

Sure, I say, let's go, walk out.

What's the rush? Cromwell comes behind.

Yani, I say, check to see he got my shoes, run ahead,

Upstairs, MegD and her tags gives the stink eye. I take my shoes from Cromwell, latch into his arm, clock clock into the DJ ballroom. The fairy silhouettes on the mirrors dance and so do we. More girls have come, boys sideline, kick trucker graffiti hats

sideways. Yani's doing a slide hip thing, barefoot. I give Cromwell back my heels and we all see who can bend lowest, not trip on dresses.

Madre wouldn't want that lace a mess, Yani says, steps on toe and I slam her with my rear end.

Don't get nasty, Cromwell says and starts this robotic graze. I can see Nez and Hoff guzzle punch, stuff marshmallows.

Dance, I call to them. They turn their backs.

Everyone too cool, Yani chants, joins Cromwell with reverse mechanic interlude. And then Lale and her crown come in and the DJ turns it low and we watch them stand around. All thin, all svelte. Lale in Betsy and these boys, stoned faced, too whatever to care.

Lale strikes a pose and we freeze. The DJ dims.

Girls, girls, and gents, claps MegD. The fairies stop, fern pine fills our noses.

Let's gather for the pic, MegD directs. We line up, let the boys watch. I'm next to Yani. Lale and co. are center and MegD the red forefront. The boys have the cameras, and snap, snap. It's our moment.

The after show, darlings, is at my loft, Lale calls out, leans into her date, this vixen man statue. He doesn't even flinch when she almost falls into him.

Whatever Lale says, Yani says.

Next Party? Cromwell says, gives me my shoes. The sound of heels lock up the mansion. Lale's black limo leads the way and MegD gives us party favors. One jumbo lollipop with a candy fairy. Cromwell goes to the dungeon and brings up my backpack and mink.

In the taxi, we pass the trees of Central Park, like in my bubbles, frosted, dark.  
Park Av. is lined with hedges, lights.

Where's this place? This from Cromwell. Me and him sit in back and Yani in  
front with cabbie. She turns the radio to jazz, and its all piano innuendo with beat, beat  
beat.

What's that you got there, Yan's? Cromwell calls to Yani. She can't hear him.

It's Lale's place, I say.

What? Cromwell says. The piano's gone mad. Park lights up orange, empty  
banks, we go through MetLife.

She has her own party loft on Bowery, I say.

Sweet, Cromwell says, starts a tap, tap at his knee. We bob our heads out the  
tunnel and now it's downtown, get off a few blocks early. Yani and Cromwell share a  
slice, cheese and sausage and garlic.

Smelly souls, I say. Cromwell lights a clove and we walk it to the loft.

Look at you, Yani says. I can see sausage in her mouth, half chewed, under a  
street light.

Look at you, Miss Bo Peep and her cigarette, says Yani.

Long as I don't singe, I say. Cromwell takes my mouth and I exhale into his.

At the building no one rings up. Cromwell rolls one and we finish Yani's Saki.  
The sky is this lit haze type of night that goes with the cars. Cromwell tells us of this  
vision he's having.

In that funk man, Cromwell starts.

Tell me bout it, man, says Yani and leans into Cromwell and the stoop and the big Christmas sky comes down.

You, Cromwell points to me. You get your bodice off and I eat your lace cause I'm a polar bear. A grand bear. And you're bare, bare to skin, on snow. Snow capped all round. And I stand on your breasts, flatten them, that's that.

She got none, Yani says, flattens her own with her hands. The roll fizzles out and the buzzer lets up. Cromwell puts on his green grin. We latch open the door and Yani and me give Cromwell our heels.

Run, Yani says and we make it up to the last floor.

Boom, boom, boom, greets us. The door is open. MegD is the first we see, all friendly, changed into her classic let down mini and low tank.

Lookin good, Yani pecks MegD's two cheeks and Cromwell offers his hand, bows.

Don't bother, MegD says, gives us three gingerbread schnapps Jell-O shots.

The loft is industrial, rectangular, metal bars on windows, stripped floor covered with these big plush multi-colored pillows. Lale and crew eye our dresses. They're all changed to mini's. Uniform get-go. Nez and Hoff are no show, too wasted off marshmallows. There's a big trampoline in the middle of it all too. A mannequin boy jumps all in shiny black, black tie, black sneakers, black eyeliner. He's got a cigarette going in his mouth and the ember tip is the only white thing about it. This industrial techno type vibe, *hot white orgasm*, stammers low moans. Everyone's got shoes off, off hand manner sunk into the pillows. I see Lale making out with her date in this way that they don't even move, just locked. Her sidekicks pick nails. Me, Lale and Cromwell pick

our way through the cloud pillows to a dark corner far away. Cromwell rolls and we get sunk in too.

Coffee stain, coffee stain, bane on me, oh my, Yani whispers. Everyone whispers. The walls start to whisper back.

*Hot white orgasm*, Cromwell whispers along with each inhale. Somehow a bottle of half drunk cheep vodka gets our way and we keep it, want it to take us a long way. I try to focus Cromwell in, but he's got this glazed thing in his eyes, in his green, and he lies between me and Yani and no one talks except one of his hands, two of his fingers that plays with Yani's white flutter lashes. Cromwell's lost in the clouds, a big lost stuffed animals with glassed over green eyes.

Cromwell, Cromwell, I poke him in the ribs and his stare dries up.

Let's go for a ride, he says, starts to kiss me.

Stop, I say, push him off.

But I do, Cromwell says, gets on his knees.

Get on my back girls, he says.

I get on first then Yani behind me and Cromwell begins to move through the pillows, the billowy expanse of the room. The murderous chant continues all around. Cromwell moves real hard, we weigh down on him and Yani's breath on my neck bounces with every jerk of his spinal cord. We pass Lale and she turns her head from her date's lips, then dips back. We float over bodies, the bodies of girls half dead, the bodies of boys half fossil. Cromwell is our dinosaur and he wants to carry both of us.

Cromwell lets go back, I say. Yani's breath starts to seep into my skin with the after taste of liquor.



Don't whine, Yani says.

We cross a thousand miles of grated windows till in the end we're back in the darkest corner of the world. Cromwell collapses into the clouds and we fall off like raindrops and stick to his arms, one on each side, sweat intergalactic. We nurse the last of the bottle. Cromwell's green grin snaps into his head, done in for and the chant dies on *hot white*. Beyond is mist that rises from the mouths of the bodies. It's cigarette, hash and lust. I curl away, curl into Cromwell because I know that Lale, she curls in.

Somewhere near dawn I wake up. The mist has disappeared from the clouds, and the clouds are just pillows now. The lust has turned into a must and a grey light spills in from between the bars. Nani remains curled, gone, stuck to Cromwell and Cromwell sleeps upright, a leg thrown over Yani's ankles, arms flung out as far as possible. I pick up my pack, Madre's mink, and pick my way through the garbage, through the limbs, through the beautiful sleeping beauty Lale. MegD is slumped on a chair by the entrance, one million empty Jell-O shots surround her. And the door is wide open, wide and open as Cromwell's arms, and I shut it, quietly when I'm finally out. I don't wear my shoes till I'm all the way down all of those stairs and my toes make no noise.

Out in the dawn, the Bowery is empty. I wrap Madre's mink and hail a cab. And in the cab, back to MetLife, through Park, I look at my face in the rearview mirror. I see a ghost. The ghost's hair cascades into a long beard and the grey of the day is the skin. And not one spot, not one tear, not one stain, not one sign that there was any damage done at all.

## House Party

She wears an absinthe dyed albacore crustacean broach flanked by two diamond roses. Pizzazz. I can't take my eyes off the snail the whole catwalk show through. She's one of those Texas dames, straight off the private streamline high up in the air. Scorpion colored fake diamond extravaganza. Even I know, and I'm no in-vogue go-go, that she's out of place in this fashion house. All I know really is how to look *I'm in here*, and in we walk past the velvet rope hob nozzled ohh ahed B&T crowd. JayJay, me, we just pretend it's love and it works out for both. He's a minor model and me his muse or vice versa. But the real trick, don't tell, is to stock up consignment style or rock out hot pants from Bleeker vintage joints. Plus some of that grandma lace mesh stocking mess. No need for flash. All you need is taste. And we all know Texas.

Besides the grand-dame, there are the usual lackeys in shadows who grab Don Per from the beauty boys who do rounds. There's the old praying mantis top-notch poser. He's got his signature drop ruby earring and a classic T-Shirt, tonight torn at choice shoulder angle. It reads BEACH BOYS. And course, all about the gaggle of chippy blow pops, girls that trace each other on stilt legs. Stomachs stitched, held high by poppy clouds. Uniforms of mock Chanel bangles, last season's wrap dresses and pumps. High, too high pumps. You can always peg a girl from the way she carries her heels. An art that requires pre-pubescent pain. If you can strut six inches, that means Eastern European runway gold, or grade school mixers at the Coco and sweet sixteen at Pierre.

BBQ flashes down a beauty boy and straddles two flutes in her long magenta fingernails. She licks her lips, wants to pinch him. JayJay would be a beauty boy too, if

he weren't such a *boulevardier*. JayJay's story is that he heralds from Idaho Potato, solid roots, defined cheekers, made his way to Wall Street. A beggar wide-eyed copy whore. And then his cheekers were found--*discovered baby*--landed a few Paris shows, an op or two, a spread or so.

JayJay nods to the beauty boy of BBQ.

Know him? I whisper, nudge his fine tuned calf with my open toe.

The agency, JayJay says. He has this way with his mouth where he cups it and pushes it one way or the other to look like he's got a secret but it's just pompous what not.

Beauty comes up to us with the tray and I follow BBQ's lead and take two, so what. JayJay arches his eyebrows. I down one straight. The showgirls prance patterned ponchos. They go down the house marble, one by one, arms outstretched to show off the maxi sleeves, knees bent and wide stepped for inching up the mini hem. The music is harpsichord with bee bop beat. Lights are dim, Don Per warms. I lose count of outfits, patterns. Hems warp into one seamless season book.

When the run's over, JayJay and I stroll the marble, sneak up the side spiral staircase to the second floor. Evening gowns. No one but us, windows draped white silk to stun out night and Madison with its empty post-work solid stare. I go up to them, the windows and stand between two poised mannequins. They touch at elbows, jut out soft breasts, lips just so adrift and semi circle eyelids closed or open, you can't tell. One wears a canary version, the other amber. Both in gowns flowed down past ankles in tumults of crisscrossed cut mesh. I lean my chin through their elbows and listen to the barely there

song of a sax. Mr. Sax, down by the gutter shaft, plays when it's quiet, a deep felt serenade for the masquerade.

Hey hey, guess who.

It's that big voice bass bravado I know too well. It's SM. I turn around.

SM, you. It's you.

JayJay does his fake cackle. I move to the side and SM takes a tissue to his nose. A billow blows down to the mesh dresses. I think of bird feathers and dandruff. JayJay and SM start up the spiral to the third floor. It's all about sportswear. We can hear the crowd down below. The harp has turned to synthesizer low mellow gear. The sporty mannequins have head weaves, and the usual semi-circle un-gaze. Forest green stretch jumpsuits with henna weave.

Sit between them, I tell SM.

You, he says.

You, I say.

JayJay does a number in my ear. *SssssMmmm*.

JayJay knows that his breath so close is poison for me. He brushes my chin, pivots, starts the climb down.

When's the wedding, you and Jay? SM jeers, takes my shoulder and we follow back down to the show. Each step digs SM's fingers into me. SM and JayJay ooze through the crowd, past empty trays, beauty boys stranded idle. Past BBQ diamond snail, past gem Mantis. The stalk girls schmooze editors. Synch takes on, pushes us out onto the street. Mr. Sax bellows.

Goodbye beauty, goodbye Texas, I say to myself, ride the air in my peep show toes. JayJay hands me a V. Slim ciggy. I brush a lock from his brow, steal his aviators, let him light me.

Cool kids, says SM.

Cool kids, says JayJay and SM snaps in his face.

Cool Aid and Cocaine, I say.

SM snuffles, takes the cigarette from my lips. Mr. Sax rocks a bluesy ballad. Way up above looms the fashion house billboard, tenfold limbs, fine pixilated flawless skin. I point, but JayJay is blind without the shades and SM too skittish. The ad's of a woman with a buzz, cuff links up to forearm, one piece dress low to navel. Diamond metal studded. And two balloons that weave a blue sky.

SM follows my finger, fresh from a new sniff. Goddess, he whispers.

JayJay pulls his eyes off my face, dons them, waves a cab. The sax dies and a voice faraway sings, *Babylon, Babylon*.

I sit between the two and SM says, Central Park South.

JayJay cocks an eyebrow at me and I push into his ribcage. I can feel his flesh go in with a breath.

Don't get too cozy, says SM. He rolls down a window and the wind hits us. The cab steals up the side-cut endgame of the park to SM's white gloved tower. Glass doors revolve and gold doors slide. We sail up twenty-four floors.

Each night SM has girls ready for him, waiting, placid. He's got a wrap around corner high roller that looks straight out both ways to the other ends of the world. The

center room is a Persian rug with low pillow seats and a long, lean backgammon table that hoists two *nargiles*.

Tonight's flavor is Eau de Vie, blasts SM, starts the coals.

JayJay swings down onto the pillows. The girl next to him is tiny and naked with cotton briefs, a floral bandana, and a lengthy tail. The tail billows in then out. She sucks on a pipe. The smoke comes out of her in florescent waves and follows a trail around her tail.

Is that heavy? I ask her. I sit across from JayJay. He does a lion yawn, inhales the pipe.

What, this? The girl takes her tail and swings it over her thighs. I play jump rope sometimes, she says.

JayJay starts to laugh. Jaundice smoke rings drift my way. Jump for us, JayJay says to Tail. Some sort of Bollywood romance ballad tumults our way. Tail begins to bounce, loops JayJay's feet. Her breasts never move.

Hop scotch, I say. SM bends over me.

Scotch?

Sure, on rocks, I say.

I sip scotch and watch. City lights blink on and off. The smoke dries to the soul every time.

Eau de Vie mixed with honey passion, special, SM shouts. The SM bravado is boom sonic by now. The music stops.

Go change, SM snaps. Tail stops the bounce and crawls off to a bedroom. JayJay follows her tail on the rug with his pupils. I can feel them dilate up her spine. SM claps, a building on the CPW turns dark and the record plays *Vive la Fete*.

Tail comes back on two feet with aqua eyes, purple shadow and black velvet. Cocktail gloves, chocker, and corsage. We assess.

Busty, says JayJay, swigs the smoke.

Tail's not tiny anymore. She's grownup. No more child's play. She stands before us, solid. SM gets up; snowflakes drop down his back to the Persian. He takes her arm, hoists it across her head. The weight of her hand makes her lean back. He peers into her mouth, taps her teeth. In the dark they shine, our stars.

This won't do, SM says, stands back. Change again, he says. JayJay blows rings at me and I catch then swallow them.

I like *you, you*, JayJay singsongs.

Say it again, I say. My words float to Central Park.

Tail comes back with her hair down now, orange eyes. She stands, solidifies, chin tall, our alabaster statue.

Follow me, SM says. The smoke makes a path. We take it to the kitchen. Here the ceiling is high, an island in the middle, and the tile on the floor, a checkerboard.

Spatula, SM announces. There's a woman's back to us against the silver chrome refrigerator. A face turns. She's got on hoops, big lips, a sideways French twist braid, and multi-colored round-filed nails. The fact turns back to the buzz of sub-zero. JayJay goes up to her back, studies her jean jacket. I see pastel flowers with ugly brown pistils.

What's cooking doll? SM says.

Way below freezing, Spatula says, barely there.

JayJay walks backwards, pushes me up against the island, the domino effect of backbone to chest.

Cha-ching. SM slaps Spatula right on the star. She's got a denim star on her suede pants, right at the ass. Spatula takes her nails and scratches them up and down chrome.

Warm baked caramel coco puffs, SM says, hands us treats. JayJay plops bird morsels on my tongue. The chocolate slides and melts.

Magic potion, SM bellows, throws his hands in the air and walks out back into the dark Moroccan night. Spatula stops her nails scratch, scratch and we listen to the dim hum of the chrome.

Let's go, JayJay says. He takes my hand and we turn the other way to a rabbit hole hallway that has panther pink walls with yellow polka dots. There's an Imperial umbrella stand with an ivory cane, the knob a tusk. On the door hangs a gold-framed oval mirror. The glass is freckled here and there black. JayJay takes me by the shoulders and makes me nose to nose with the freckles. He takes my hair and flops it all forward and I'm blind but his fingers are dug into my scalp. He's reading my memory lines and I try to think of love. I open and close the holes in my mind and one moment the world is panther, the next moment dark grey.

Fool, JayJay says and we leave the pink wall, the yellow dots. JayJay takes the cane, throws it over his shoulder and we're gone.

Back down to gravity, warped out of glass and gold, JayJay lights a cigarette and walks two inches ahead. He hands back a drag every six steps. I hold each one in till the next. My feet are loud and hard against the sidewalk. I don't walk on any cracks. JayJay



goes into a bodega to re-stock. He lets a butt sizzle on the concrete and the ember keeps on for years. The flower boy waits outside for drunks to buy tulips. There are blue ones and turquoise too. The boy wears a girl's dress vest that's too short and shows off his baby fat belly button. He has small hairs that curl up around the button and go down a bit into black dress trousers.

My sister, he explains, points to his vest.

I nod and look down at the ember, smush it with my peep toe shoes.

Murderer, JayJay says.

You're back, I say, look up.

This is for you. JayJay pulls out tulips from behind, blue and turquoise. I take them to my nose.

What do they smell like? JayJay asks. I lick them.

Like chocolate, I say.

JayJay turns his heels, walks away. I wait three seconds then follow.

I love you, says the flower boy.

I love you, I whisper, stare ahead at JayJay and fall through a crack.

On the subway, we are alone. An old man with enormous, withered balloons tied to his belt walks through. The seat rattles each time the train hits the track. JayJay gallops two fingers on my knee.

Tharuptharuptharup, he narrates.

Knight in shining white? I ask.

Let me tell you a dream, he says.

He tells me about a pair of legs that juggle hula-hoops into the sky. In the sky sits a constellation made up of the North Star, Venus, and a dying dwarf. These stars hold together the girl's legs. Fireflies under a luminous moon are her wings and the early dawn her sanitarium blue tights.

We emerge to JayJay's big-faced cream Chevy, perfect paralleled bump to bum. JayJay hands me my Japan flag cardy waiting on the dashboard. It's got the big red sun set right against my heart, a tight prep number.

Ready-set-go. JayJay revs up the Chevy and I run. When we hit a red light I throw my arms up in surrender. I get in and we roll down avenues to the East River. He lives in a pre-war walk up, fourth floor. Tiled ceiling, brass fire escape, dragon entryway wall sconces.

JayJay unlocks to a big canvas splotted in periwinkle, azure, and scarlet. Plume feathers in blood lace together to make a wide V-neck collar of a female neckline. A sea foam hummingbird zooms past her.

Who is it? I ask.

You, I think, JayJay says, pulls out pumpkin ice cream and a forty of Red Stripe from the fridge.

The bird, I say, accept a glass of lager.

JayJay shrugs. His place is really just one big storage room, with a thirty-step ladder up to a sleeping closet. JayJay spoons ice cream. The bird hums on axle next to the blood feathers.

I take the plastic recorder off the floor and put it to my mouth and tap. I play and play till JayJay dims the lights and does puppetry with the shadows.

What were you playing? JayJay asks.

I don't tell him I played to his dream of the legs. They came to me through the instrument chamber and the limbs began to conduct. JayJay lifts me up and carries me toward the bathroom. I pretend to be dead, lend him all my weight.

I want to be a schoolteacher with a whip, JayJay singsongs.

And I a drunken party girl, I lullaby back.

JayJay fills up the bathtub, real hot. He drops one blop of bubble oil and it billows into an octopus. The octopus breathes in and out. JayJay unbuttons my dress and I dip in, let my ankles scathe. The octopus latches on. JayJay rubs my shoulders, rubs into me. I look out the small window next to the tub. Down the street are vapors that zoom out of a Con Edison manhole. A girl walks by in a raincoat. She holds a clutch and her shoes, box cut, take even steps. The vapors swallow her. I turn around to JayJay. The octopus has dissipated.

Can I smoke naked and alone when it's over? I ask him.

He puts a bubble on my chin.

Only if you eat the humming bird, JayJay says.

I promise, I say.

JayJay brings his hands to my face, turns me around, smooths down my hair, my skin, his skin. The wires of my mind fuse to his and for a moment I almost believe it's real. Diamonds wait, catwalks canter away.

## Mirror, Mirror

I can chant this all day and Oji won't be able to do scrat about it, that scab. Oji's frozen just so in my studio, pretty black locks, pretty face, tight T, tight boy skinny jeans. He matches the dark oak frame of the mirror, the one I found in Madame X's on Wooster. You know, the old odds and ends joint. I stroll in yesterday, lunch break, rain, not hungry, decide to roam. Moment I walk in Madame X is all like girl, you need *this*, points to this old piece of shit mirror off to the side. All the way back, real dark, past those rows of rocking chairs and beauty jars, weathered stained glass, spider webs and all. Twenty-five bucks. Madame X rubs it with an old cheese cloth and it really does start to shine. I stuff it in a cab after work, crank it up my walkup, ba boom ba boom with each step.

A wonder the glass never shattered. And somehow, that glass depth did add to my roof top hovel. Like the fake feel of more space in its clouded, age speckled reflection. Like the cracked porcelain basin, the sink, under the yellow light with the metal chain. Or the bay windows that see the church arc and hear the pigeons and bell at noon or so. Or my bed that pulls out from the wall. Or the kitchen with the cabinets that creek and hold small tea cups with rose petals on the stem. All of this reflected, worm holed through Madam X's splotched mirror. So that's what I think at first, right before the Oji miracle. That when Madame X promised wonders, it was this obvious depth I'd been living without. Before, no full length mirror to check it all out, the digs, and too, the outfit. Before, I just stood on a stool in front of the bathroom vanity and if things matched, it worked. But that night, right before I go out – Friday's always the night – I change it up

five times before I land the perfect set-up. What I hadn't seen before, the horrors. How the heels must have jutted out too square under a tunic or how the hair up looked all wannabe sideways eighties over a summer mini-midi dress. But with the full length vision, I pair it perfect for the night--hot Mojave wedges, polka bolero, a splash of cleavage. Transformatory indeed. And Madame X was right. What a fateful Friday night.

Now, the noon after, Oji rolls his eyes, stares rotten back at me, like, so what, you looked hot.

Scram, scram, scram, I sing to myself and roll my eyes back at him.

Somehow that tune, the three note progression meaning incoming caller, got stuck in my head and now everything I sing to him is to his own beat. Scram, scram, scram. It won't go away. Oji blinks. It's his ring tone. It rang all night long. Unknown number. But I know who it was, is. Maria, the lady of hourglass fertility. Finally I smashed the thing under my wedges. Jumped on it a few hundred times but the scram, scram, scram, that's still there. And when it rings in my head, I sing it to Oji and I know he aches, but blink's all he can do, movement wise. Limbs and joints forever stuck in that stupid show off I'm the shit arms akimbo stance.

Spit in your mouth, love master.

Oji winks, all he can do, watch me, untouchable, his fingers, mouth, tongue, stuck. I'm all Roma tan, dark eccentric. Really, I'm just a mutt, maybe not so catchy, just an off-sort. But once upon a time when we first met, that first summer, that first humid summer in the city. Once upon a time, Oji was all, no way, no mutt, you Moroccan princess. Well, now he can't speak and I can't speak to him and it's my thoughts that reach. That's the downside. Like, even though he's there, eons, trillions, bazillion

gazillions, till I'm old and rickety. Oji stuck in my mirror till earth cascades, crumbles, collides with a super nova. No, I can't ever grab hold of it, Oji's brain. What's more, no wrinkles for Oji. Perfect Oji. What will I do when my back bone eye hennas start to sag tragic?

Don't cry Oji. Is that a tear I see? I know, you can't tear through glass, I know. What you say Oji, drink time?

We got the same tick tock craves, Oji and me. Love smokes, bored booze, hard metal death jump up and down mid-afternoon naps on park grass. I keep some cheep wine under my bed. What with no real no kitchen, no fridge. Just my top floor hovel with a grimy toilet and leaky shower. Plus two mirrors, one above the toilet crusted with dirt, and now one of me in Oji. And wine. And Oji. What more could a girl want?

I spit onto Oji's reflection. Or more like I spit onto my reflection, which is Oji. At first it was simple, like the power of the full length overwhelming enough. But now I know. Madame X really meant it. See, I've captured Oji, till eternity, in my mirror.

Mirror, mirror of this room, who's always yours?

It can change, what I ask him. The trick is that Oji has no talk. But when you stare at him, he captures the gaze, enters pronto that realm of sixth sense possibility, makes it felt what he wants to retaliate back. The connections between atoms, synapses, neurons, protons, what have you. Biological mind games are his food, his snack. For example.

Oji, Oji on my mind, tell me love can last through hell.

Oji blinks a long one, stares me down. If he could enunciate it would be *witch* I'm pretty sure. Or, *stupid, silly witch*. I'm pretty sure his glare squint means this. But the mirror's low on the magic here—his exact thoughts on me are his to keep.

Screw me, screw you, screw we.

I sing this, to his now dead ring tune. From the way he flinches his stare at that, I can almost hear his body crave for out. So, Oji's caught in hell, my hell at that, or at least I bet that's how he feels. But boy did he ask for it, stupid boy. Thinking he can ditch me for Maria, that double-death breasted fertility nympho.

No matter you got me hooked, you slate-chested lover. Oh no, doesn't matter a smidgerine you dark locked monster. Oji's got a marble smooth stomach and black hawk looks.

When you spite me, you're dead meat. Dead darling man meat caught forever in my master minded mirror. Oji squints. I can feel the heat.

I don't care, no, not one bit, I spit once more.

See, this mirror is magic-like. It doesn't work like normal ones. Instead of showing you back to you, it eats up a choice enemy and projects them there, captured. So really nothing that exits around you, including you, gets tangled up in its rays. It just holds that person, Oji in my case, and makes him stare, as long as I want. Maybe this way he'll regret not being able to touch me anymore. And that was his choice. Thinking he can creep like a crocodile, cower and camouflage behind earthen mounds like a lizard. Thinking he can have two pies, two cakes.

Eat your cake and stuff it too, hot stuff.

Oji scowls. He's caught onto my mean desire and he sure doesn't like it.

What the hell, go to hell, I caught you.

I caught him and Maria all drunk and hot against the bathroom stall, like that was the best place to hide in the whole damn city. Friday night, we're all at *First Base on*

*First*, where we go diving every Friday. And what do I find? Not yet ten o'clock, not yet even one drop of liquor down my throat, go in for a quick nose powder and tada. Like magic. I find Maria's can-cans bare-ass naked in his hands, my Oji's hands. And their lips locked. My Oji's lips locked to hers.

Oji, moji, mojo, mimi.

Oji starts to grimace. I stick out my chin, fling my own mane the way I know he likes it, how the scent of my lilac shampoo dissipates to his nose and makes him just get off. He may have me hooked, but now I'm his bait. I fling, swish, stick a tongue out, turn and take off. Bathroom nose powder time. Flip the finger from behind for final effect.

Another trick is that it's like permanent Botox injections, being in the magic mirror. When I say no movement allowed, I mean none, body wide, extra frosting, extra snug, hug-me-tight. Not only mouth and forehead firm against stretch, but arms and feet and ten toes and ear lobes and elbows and all. All except the eyes. Snapshot, freeze frame. That classic Oji stance. Those sleazy sex-me eyes. I can't help but turn back around, just to make sure. Who knows. Madame X and her mirror and all, it might just be one big hoax.

Take it back, Oj.

Oji's grimace goes away. I go up to him real slow in a balanced cat prow, breath onto his face till it fogs over then lick it off. I know Oji frustrates inside. So I turn, cat dance backwards, leave him in half-clouded pseudo-perspiration.

On lieu to the loo, I almost trip over those big ass hot Mojave red wedges of last night I'd kicked off. So I put them back on. Still got on the low-cut bell-bottoms that stick right to my ass bones where I have these snappy evil pupil's permi hennaed. And a



white slutty bolero. And how I can just feel his stare droolin' on my behind just walking away to dirty bathroom. Beyond, I can hear Saturday outside, seven in the morning. Weekenders rolling out on the Jitney, runners club, soft traffic, dog walkers, smeared bubble gum sidewalks under a lame sun. It's been a long night, a long morning.

I get Oji back to my place last night at midnight (took awhile for all the drugs I slipped in his cocktail to kick). For the vodka to deliver the punch. And took a bit to figure out how to shove him in the mirror. Well, more like took a bit to figure out the mirror could take him in the first place. Like how every time I tried to kick over his drunken fetus roll, the mirror would start to buzz. And so I rolled Oji closer, rolled and rolled, closer and closer, just to hear that whir. Just to make it match Oji's stupid tempo when it rang. Scam, scam, scam, rings the phone. Whir whir whir, rings the mirror. Finally, he hits that old piece of crap gilded frame. Gulp, goes the mirror, eats up my Oji, praying mantis in action. One AM Oji is mine, within my mirror, everlasting. And can you believe? Didn't sleep one wink wondering over how like kazam, my Oji wrapped in, woke up, stoop up and stood straight till now, arms akimbo stance. I point to him. I can feel him want to fall back out and pass right back out with dreams of multi-breasted goddess orgies. As if.

Don't brew up any excuses, Oji. I'm onto you, I say walking awa, do another hair flip.

Au revoir, I wave, strut to the bathroom.

Finally I'm in front of a real mirror, the moldy vanity in the bathroom. My face stares at me for the first time since last night. The olive tan is sunk to Grinchy green with yellow worm hole sockets. The kind of forehead that has too many tired cracks when

propped up. Fairy dust application always helps, splashes of cold water. That's how you stay up a whole night staring at you and your darling, your lynx cat and you, one image.

It's up to me baby when, and if, you get out, I yell back to mirrored Oji.

I can feel him out there without looking. Oji and his bones rub pain at my very thoughts. Hell, I don't feel sorry. Big man on campus thinks he can get what he wants when. What, with that voluptuous man stealer?

Don't think so honey, don't you even consider that hefty bombshell anymore. I say this just to make sure he gets it.

Big man on campus big city brawl, go stick it.

Oji's the classic up-east boy toy. Mom and Pop's classic Park Avenue six. Art deco decor, dynasty furniture, empire chinaware. Telling me I'm just a suburban simple girl with a gypsy lore. Well, Mister half Japanese dare devil nose rings. Too cool. I wonder if I think hard enough about ripping them straight out of sockets. Wonder if he'll feel it. Can blood stain glass from inside? My face starts to look alright, the kick hitting the blood vessels and making a sort of blush on cheekbones. I go back out to show it off for Oji, to make him see it in me and just crave, all agony. Back in front of him, his brow-sowl's deepened.

You feel want some? What if I pull you out real slow, whisper in your ear, kiss follicles, twist loose brow ends? He always got off on little oddities, all the time, always begging. One way street, his road rules.

Now it's my way or my way, monsieur mi amour. What more could a girl want, tell me Oji, boy dream you.

Oji is thirsty, but he can't get any. Mirror is true solid, retains heat and breath and

human body but there is no possibility of penetration. Plus, plastic champagne flute is all I got, for me. I sip and stand, switch from one hip jut to the other, scratch around the hem, like a little bit under, just to make him itch. How horrible it must be, to have an itch that can't be scratched. Oji starts a frown.

Don't you dare, don't you dare. Always your damsel, dare devil.

I never told Oji this, but I have this dream that maybe one day he'll wrap me in an Obi, that of his grandmother, or great-grandmother. He'll wrap me in an Obi, an olive Obi to match me, and then he'll wrap my feet tight into two tulips. Two lotuses, tight enough till I can't even scream because there is a cool, silk scarf that suffocates. Then he'll un-wind me from the Obi, my Oji, make me see black planets swim in my head. He'll unbind me and I'll be all numb, my hands will become airless, no nerves. My placenta will turn purple. Finally he'll free my soles. But Oji can't read daydreams through the glass. I fish under the dark bed, bring out a bottle of near empty fume blanc, drain it in the flue. Pinky out, straight, a light back stretch, hold it. Wedges don't stammer on end.

Adieu!

We, Oji and me, say Adieu, to life, or toast, or long live, or what not. Adieu means last drop down to love.

Join me on the bed, Oji?

I blow a kiss mirror wise, kick off the wedges, run to the molded vanity, one last powder dust, cold water splash, just to make sure this gypsy glow still goes. And when I'm corpse-style on the bed, the traffic seeps up from way down, way down—green,

yellow, red stop and go meters. Pshhh, vroom, zoom, boom. The yellow cabs attack and swerve a bus.

Oji, Oji, Oji. I try to take on the metronome of the world.

I close my eyes and feel him, Oji, who I have captured. Oji wears tight boy jeans, a white tee, classic. Dark lion's mane, Japanese black silk eyes. He rolls me over, bites into backbone evil henna pupils. Pins my hands down, eats off the powder stuck in my nails, claws my skin, bleeds it to tissue, tongues it clean. I am old and ripened, he young and frozen. He so he feeds on me, stuck to me, forever smooth, forever cold.

## The Vampire

Metropolitan Hospital hovers right over the river.

It's the only option, say the paramedics.

Two men stand above me. I see their black combat boots behind my sprawled reflection in the long mirror of the coat closet. Above me, the small silver clock on the phone table is stuck at midnight. It died while I waited for them to show up, the silence of my small studio broken only by the whoosh of cars on rained asphalt outside. The cockroaches are rotted mute, too. Cold comes up through the floorboard cracks. These spaces soothe me, let me breathe slow, swallow down the sickness.

Take her by the arms, one of the men says.

One takes my hands, the other my feet. I am a weightless doll. I can smell the caked-over vomit stuck to strands, my face covered in hair.

I crawled out of bed to call 911. Never made it back. From then to now, the night finally impounded. Dry heaves of acid taste, small pools of inner waste. The constant churn, upturn of intestines. Nothing left. Bones rub at walls. A worm gnaws last blood cells.

I meet Ipey dancing the night before. We're both at the club, at the table with Dezmon. There are a lot of other girls but he ends up closest to me, and I feel his shirtsleeve against my leg when I grind my heels into the leather of the round couch.

Work the couch, work the room, work the world, Dezmon says, pounds a fist in the air, makes his words go to the pop of the song.

The same as every night we go out. Dezmon tells us the place and we go. No matter how cold it is outside, how dark, how tired. Legs bared, eyelids glued wide open with glitter. Sometimes I dance with another girl, let her feel out to me and stay away like that, revolve around her to shut it off. But some nights the music is good. Ipey passes me up a glass. We cheers on it. Dezmon sits in the middle, high fives over to Ipey. The DJ goes electric. Ipey puts his hand around my ankle. I feel his fingers circle it, go up and down and so I dance.

And yesterday Ipey calls, tells me to meet him at his place, a brownstone down just off the square. He has black and white photos up of a beach. White sand and a dark sea. Three of these, all the same. They line a fake fireplace mantel in his game room.

My game room, he says, waves his hand to a large flat TV and a rack of discs, ceiling high.

Sit down. He points to the couch.

When he leaves the room, I watch the empty black screen and the three frames. There is no difference between the beaches.

Wine?

He comes back with a half empty bottle, pours some in two coffee mugs, pulls out a disc from the middle of the rack. It's southern guitar and steady drums.

Had fun last night? Ipey winks, tinks my mug, swigs.

We line and lick. The heat comes on and we take off our clothes. He closes his eyes when he comes. I feel his sweat stick to my skin as he peels off. The beaches remain

empty, motionless. Outside it starts to rain.

The sickness starts on the cab ride back. The rain is so heavy, made of pelts, hard with no forgiveness. The windshield wipers are angry, never fast enough to un-blind. The cab swerves uptown, a sudden collapse goes from my head on down. A wave that turns to cold takes my fingers and numbs from nails to the tips of my ears. My stomach arches and waits, wave after wave. The buildings are empty now, lobbies stark with silenced water fountains. Geometric statues make cut out shadows back to the sidewalk. Slumped homeless cardboard stands against church steps. And back uptown the lights of apartments, small unreachable portals. The waves merge into the sideways downfall of the night. With each wave a thunderbolt rocks the cab. When we make it, I run through the wet bolts, feel the lights above me turn into whirlpools of ultraviolet. Somehow I climb the five flights. My bed takes me in and the waves begin to turn my eyelids inside. The wood of the floor opens up. I can hear the cockroach chew.

Metropolitan Hospital lies right over the river and at night the trash barges rumble down to the mouth. I hear the two men squeak their combat boots away after they wheel me into a room. It's a large room with three cots but it's only me. The cots are empty, flat, starched and tucked in tight. Silver droplet stands stand next to them. A machine blinks red. Curtains to separate too, but they're all open. I lie next to a cot on the stretcher. And past the cots a row of windows to the river with the slow winded figures of barges. The men leave the door open a bit, and the hallway is lit green. It flickers and I can hear the buzz. I am hungry and hollow. They have strapped my arms and legs and

covered me with a coarse blanket. I watch the light of the hallway. The green goes on and off and the barges creep.

I wake to arms that lift me off and put me on the cot. She has long purple nails that strap me back. I watch a nail tap out a vein on my elbow indent. A needle sticks. I hear it suction.

Shh, she says.

I know it's light outside now. The way that sun softens angles, even the angle of the needle stuck into my arm. Forty-five degrees. The blue of my vein that grows large, pulses with each suck.

Three interns in white surround me. My hands are still strapped, still stuck. The one in the middle is a woman with a blond tight drawn ponytail. She has very thin lips and square glasses against blue eyes. Her hand works a pencil against a pad. She presses it hard, makes fast words. The other two are men, one on each side of her. She whispers out her words and they nod. One pauses to check the needle. His fingers are hard on my skin. I hear the suction shut off. My vein bounces, deflates under.

When the doctor appears it is night again. They've closed the door so as only a tiny green shows from the bottom. And past that the vastness of the windows, the empty river, the wait for the late night barges. They've left me strapped but un-sucked. I hear him shut the door and I watch the nose of the first barge appear in the first window. The



way it churns the water strums into the room.

Dr. Kosto, he says, soft, just barely.

His hand, thin and cuffed, comes out. He takes my fingers. Closes his around mine. He takes his fingers out of mine and I feel him sit on the cot, lift a knee up off the ground so that he's half there with me, half still propped on the linoleum. He peels off the sheet I'm in. They've put me in the nurse scrubs that stop at the forearms and calves so that the straps fit tight.

Dr. Kosto is young. He slowly unbuttons his white coat. The hairs of his chest are black and his skin is dark, deep, a sunned hide.

Don't be scared, he says.

He takes off his coat, lets it fall to the ground then begins to unbutton my shirt. When he is done, he thumbs the circumference of each of my breasts, bit by bit. His touch warms and I close my eyes. When I open them I see the suck needle on my left nipple. When he pulls it out blood begins to flow.

You are beautiful, he says, puts his lips to drink the stream.

The next day is the same. The cots again empty. Purple Nail pokes my vein, starts the suck, the feed, the fill. And then sleep till the interns. Blue Glasses jabs her pencil. She sharpens her blue eyes, whispers, and a man, one or the other, unhinges.

Your skin is thin, Dr. Kosto says.

It is night again.

His voice has a slight accent I can hear now. Only a tiny tinge that makes his words come out at the end with too much hiss. He undresses me, presses my breast, listens for the pulse.

Just enough, just enough.

He lets go, strips to his chest.

Be good, he hisses, puts a finger to my lips.

But I'm not scared. When the prick of the needle comes I am ready for it. I look out the window while he waits, measures the time to create what is needed for him to eat from my body. The barge is steady, forward. It seeks the mouth, slumps against the night toward release. When Dr. Kosto pulls out this time, I watch his profile move against the barge. He covers it when he sinks his teeth, a soft bite, into my breast. I smell his cologne. It is bitter, an undertone of iron.

After he fills, I listen to him leave. He opens the door, shines the green buzz, shuts it. Not even the sound of his feet, no weight, no trace of our meeting. Hours till Purple Nail's next feed. The straps on my ankles are like Ipey's fingers. They encircle round and round, feel out the arteries connected to my feet, strangle me to sleep.

Ipey holds me, I sway, and Dezmon comes over. I try to stay straight, Ipey's fingers binding my movement on the couch. Then Dezmon takes my chin and gives me a kiss, slaps Ipey on the back. I fall next to him. Ipey carries me off to the backroom. It is dark with red drapes over separated lounge chairs. The floor is slick metal. I feel a hit. It slides me back and forth on my knees.

Are you ready?

Dr. Kosto speaks into my ear. His breath is warm and makes moisture deep down, all the way to my backside. This time he takes me in the other breast. The days are all one now. He alternates. Time stopped when the cockroaches dried up, when the city inverted.

Dr. Kosto's teeth gnaw at the holes he creates. I spill. The soft hairs of his dark body just touch me. He drinks and I feel his hands go lax. He likes to circle my wrists, to hold himself steady. The straps choke me with his tension but by the time he's done, the air comes back through his hands into mine. I try to capture his iron, seep it into my pores by inhaling him as he walks away from my body. He buttons my shirt back up, throws his coat on from off the floor. Only when he's shut the door, shut in a green flash once more, do I let him go, let myself go under.

I dance up close to the girl next to me. I can feel her arms slide up and down mine, sticky, smooth. Dezmon pops a bottle.

Candy time candy time, he says, fist in air, beat on his brain.

We take turns. The room swells.

The girl puts her tongue on my face and we kiss, fall onto the couch with Dezmon. Bodies walk on top of me and the music screeches.

I want to open my eyes, to itch my arms, my legs, my soles, the inside area of my kneecaps. But I can't move. My hands are stuck, my body glued. There is a pain at my

breast that I want to tear open. It moves back and forth, a shock wave from nipple to nipple.

Shh.

Purple Nail starts the suck.

With each pull, the minutes shed away till night.

I believe this is a special night, says Dr. Kosto.

He stands above my cot, back to me. We look out the window. He has come early I know because the barge nose is still unseen. I watch him unbutton then drops his coat. His back is beautiful, tailbone gone in deep toward torso. I want to run two fingers down that canyon. I think of the smooth slide of my skin riding down his.

He turns around and his soft black hairs quiver. He is more than ever in this moment, more than ever before. But I am patient. I am patient when he unbuttons my chest, takes a thumb and presses around my breasts. His breath is quick tonight, quickens with each step.

Yes, he says, props himself on the cot, slides a thumb suddenly down the side of my throat.

His weight once more bears me down, sinks in the stiffness of the springs. I watch the needle move upward. It shines, catches a gleam from the green strip underneath the door.

He is ready. I wait for the pain.

When Dr. Kosto sticks my throat, he cuts off any air I have to scream.

The gush of blood seizes up away from the needle, moves his mouth to my

throat, his teeth into me, just past my mouth, I feel him loosen a wrist strap. He is closer now than ever before, his body, his chest, his hairs, one with my own. His iron so near blinds me. His taste inside of me is lost, living. I raise my hand into his canyon, slide way down. I feel his force enter me, take me as a barge nose appears just out, just out beyond our bodies. He never comes up for air. I give myself to him and the river finally takes the barge out beyond the mouth of waiting ocean.

## Fifth Avenue

Baby lives in one of white stone, ten floor, small building on Fifth Avenue. Old, black gate door with code box. Sees all trees out there from window. Tree top in spring white flowers and trash bag that stuck in branch with winter wind. I know just what it look like from her window. Small bird in morning, loose sewer top at night that go ba boom. Lights red then white, ambulance song that go by. And Baby, do she see me? Me with yellow taxi and dark window. I watch you Baby. She wear cotton panties and white shirt that if I look very good I see her two breast. Baby is angel with white skin, too white. In hot summer night I close eye and see it come down to street and fall to gutter of city.

Please stay, not go away, I beg Baby.

I only go in night, right before Ramazan take over car for late night. Hour I stay. She leave blind up but no care to look out to park. To see plastic bag on tree, to see the green tree so green still in dark.

I tell Baby, In two month it all gone to cold, all gone like you blood in vein stop too one day. But all Baby do up there, she listen to radio and look at mirror and do her hair into big bird ponytail. But then window cut me off, me across street. But I know she feel blood right to her thigh and they dance. I put on too, what I know Baby on, one station with girl song. We put it on and when I see she dance, I feel her hair drop loose on me like dream.

I find Baby in window last week. End of night, I go down Fifth Avenue. All the light, one go green then next, like clock, not one person live. But one it stay red for very

long time, and when I look up, Baby there. Her like angel thigh that dance, I can imagine soft. After that, I make it stop every night, green or not. A week now. On night with no cloud, the moon shine and when Baby stop her dance, go into sleep, the moon take me away. Back over empty bridge with city that keep Baby safe. Back home to couch of Abla and Mustafa.

Abla married to Mustafa. They meet first year we come here. I say to Abla from first time, Mustafa nothing but peasant boy with no head. But Abla only listen to herself. They meet because Mustafa delivery boy in market. Abla tell him where to go, he go. She tell him to wait, he wait. She tell him to chop onion, he chop. Sometime she tell him to sleep on floor and when he cry like dog she pat him head. Nothing in there, too stupid to even lie. And then one day I come home, month now maybe, and she hold old gun. She like mad woman, scream, tear, she try kill Mustafa. And all idiot do, he stand there, big idiot hand over eye. Abla scream and scream, she wave gun and I pray he live.

Mustafa leave, I tell her. Mustafa you leave, I tell him.

He nod like dog, idiot hand shake in air and he walk out, Abla still gun in air. I take from her, put in car at night and keep under seat. Now Abla has girl. Ezra, short, blue hair. She stay with Abla in room, in big bed. Every time I come home they laugh. Four in morning, five, always they laugh. Then Ezra come out to get water to drink and I pretend sleep, turn back to Ezra. But I can see Ezra girl got nothing on but blue hair.

I say Abla, If Ezra girl stay, she pay too.

This way I pay less, let me stop early now for Baby, no more keep on go the last minute when I go back over bridge and Ramazan he take car over. I not tell him,

Ramazan, about gun. No business of his. I know he have little boy at home and Ramazan he too good heart for trouble.

Ramazan, he say to me, How you not go crazy with Ezra girl and you Ablā?

He look me like I loose to hell, like I live very bad. Every night Ramazan, he go to center and he pray for son and sometimes Ramazan he ask if I come too. But now I see Baby. Baby I know she true angel. What matter, I be honest and know wrong, right and I keep hand clean. Only people who have idiot hand like Mustafa, he kill love.

And when it night and Baby with music dance for me in window, no bus, no horn, I feel love. They say rich on Fifth Avenue put in what they call city window, shut off even sound car alarm. But Baby, Baby not shut off eye. She always keep curtain up. Left up even when she close light for the sleep. Maybe so bird in morning, he see Baby. Or so sun over park, he see her. Make her close eye yellow and pink and make her dream color. I try too, to see what Baby see. I try be like her right when sun hit world.

But Ezra come out and say, Why you leave curtain open, why you get all color make you crazy all day in eye?

Then Ezra come over and she close curtain. I open eye a bit. She have on blue, blue silk robe, and her blue hair. She smell like cigarette when she walk away. Both Ablā and Ezra they crazy, but they ask nothing and I ask nothing and it go on long like that. Ezra not too bad too. She cook in morning, when Ablā go down to work in market. I watch her blue head move this way, that way, sink, oven, back sink, and she put on Sezan Aksu tape. The girl, they love Sezan and her big voice. I listen Sezan cry about all the men, how they hurt her, how she want die. And then it start to smell like home with the fried lamb Ezra cook. But Ezra too blue for home. Ezra sing too loud for home, to Sezan,



too loud like she talk too. Ezra, have no care. Ezra she love Abla, she make her finger dirty with oil of lamb, she paint her finger, her hair blue. She let blue vien and light of morning go through leg. Abla, maybe she think I sleep.

Ezra phone to Abla in the Market, Abla bring me beer, Abla bring me honey! Abla bring me white cheese! Abla bring me cigarette. Abla that, Abla this.

Then Abla come up and they go in bedroom and wait for oven, and they cook something in bedroom together, like they say back home. And then I dream of Baby who dance and Sezan how she sing. She sing, don't make game with me, don't make like you no heart, and I dream of honey pastry and syrup and how I want to kiss Baby with honey in mouth.

When Ezra make the white cheese pastry and honey this is best. I take two piece with me for night. And when I stop at end for Baby, the honey it soft, and the white cheese, it a bit hard, and together it fill whole night with Baby inside mouth. The cheese with honey on tongue and she dance to mirror, hair up, hair down, and on radio we listen. I know they sing the same song like Sezan. No matter where in world, same song. Here, there, home, Fifth Avenue, over bridge, Abla in Market, Ezra in kitchen, they sing same thing. In her heart she wonder if she find him, the one who make her happy. And I tell her on dark street, that this song, it mean nothing. It only mean to make pretty girl mad, like Abla, like Abla who with Ezra and Ezra blue hair, all the love how it go away. Then the honey stuck to stomach when Baby turn off light and I know she sad because the song now in her forever. The plastic bag on tree it start to blow up with wind and so I go. I go, let green light take me over bridge to Ramazan.

You come late every night now, Ramazan say to me.

He smoke cigarette outside. I give him key, look him in eye so he not see how I lie. Ramazan point up to sky. The moon it very white and one cloud over make it blue.

Blue moon, he say. Like blue moon in my village, he say.

And I think Abba and Ezra with moon shine in bed, in Ezra blue hair. And then I think Baby and skin white like moon shine all around.

Go sleep. You watch game with me later, Ramazan say and get into car. We win, I promise, he wink. I pick you up at ten.

Ramazan turn on light and I watch him go away to bridge, to city. His blue moon now part of very early, very early dark sky and I wish that it fall, soft, like song, into Baby and she dream.

Ramazan come in morning, ten like he say. He usually have car afternoon too, but when game, Ramazan miss everything.

Ezra wake me and say, Ramazan, he wait outside.

A cigarette hang in Ezra mouth. Her hair look blue and she wear small, small blue dress that show her breast. I see blue vein that go up Ezra throat. I think, Baby, I know she have same kind that go up, up, like stream from heart.

What you look at? Ezra say, pull sheet off me.

Lazy, you get up, go, leave me alone today, she say, walk away. Behind Ezra blue dress show light between leg. But she too quick to stay, let me see vein. She too busy in kitchen already with Sezan so I let her go and I go too to Ramazan outside.

Why you not wear a shirt? Ramazan say when I outside.

We go to restaurant next to center with four television. Everyone wear the black, white shirt and it smell like sweat, cigarette. My head hurt and all I can think, Baby and

night and when it come. I drink lot of coffee but still it feel sick, inside, in head, all over.  
Everyone on feet, ready for goal, but I sit.

Ole, ole, they yell. Ole, ole, ole, they yell.

Ole, ole, Ramazan yell next to me, go with his fist in air three time. Then I think, what wrong with me? Why no I love my team? And I do this too, fist in air, and yell for Baby and then the head, it stop hurt. And when they cheer for win, I go outside like they and we run down street and we take shirt off and I am victor too. And the whole day I feel like this. I try go back sleep, but all I do watch Ezra in kitchen in blue dress with cigarette. She sing loud to Sezan and I smell rice with raisin and tree. Then, no reason, she stop Sezan and come and sit on couch.

Why your Abba she not bring me beer? Ezra say.

Why your Abba, when I call market, she tell me, Ezra you sop call, you wait? Ezra poof and poof cigarette then she get up and go back kitchen, go back to Sezan.

I watch Ezra roll grape leave, fill with cinnamon and rice and raisin. My mouth it water because of heat of day and win of game and all I think again Baby. How Baby she wait for me at night. I think how I want night to come very bad whole day. And when it come, when night it come and I cross bridge in car and I see light of city, I feel victor in head again, like it just happen. And I think, what if I go Baby now? I think, what it matter one night with less money in end?

But when I reach Baby, her window, the tree with bag and the quiet Fifth Avenue, Baby, she not there. Not her light in window. Only quiet and tree and more quiet. I turn off car and let bug come in from window, from street. I turn it on, on station with song, with girl song we listen to. But still Baby, she not come home. The moon, it cross one

side to other of stripe on road and window of building, up there, down here, go no, off, but still Baby, still Baby is dark. I try sleep like this with song, and window open, and bug with green wing who fly in, out, one tree to next.

And then I see angel who come out of car. My car it is and she wear white dress down to thigh. She fall to sidewalk, no shoe, and blood it come from knee. I take old gun from under seat, put in pocket, run out and hold her by hand, small hand. The blood, it touch me, warm, like air, hot like air. Her angel hair fall in it, soft like I know, to my hand and I make her stand, and we stand in blood.

Okay, okay? I say to her and I take hair from her face and I see the face, it is Baby. It is Baby with hair in my hand and her blood on hair and her thigh white like dress. But her thigh they dance not to music but to body, whole body. She dance and want to fall, fall back to street.

No, I say to Baby, no. I help you Baby, I say to her. Baby look me in eye and then I see how dark is inside. Like black of home, like black sea. Like moon when tea cloud come out. I smell many mile of sky between land and land of moon and root of tree that grow under street. Her eye have the blood of her knee, her thigh. Her eye have root that grow from home.

Let go, let go, Baby scream, loud like Abla with gun. But I not touch it when Baby she scream. I not touch when Baby run she to door and put in code. I not touch gun but look at ground, her blood dry, dark, see it go away.

In morning I wake to Ezra in blue, blue hair. She smile to me, open curtain and she put on Sezan. Then she put cigarette in mouth and come sit on couch. I see from sun that come to room, I see Ezra and her blue vein from neck to mouth that let out smoke.

Your Abla, she left, Your Abla, she left, Ezra say and Sezan sing.

Your Abla, she left, Your Abla, she left me, Ezra sing with Sezan and now I see one tear that go down from side of face and fall on blue vein of neck.

Mustafa? I ask her.

Ezra nod and point down to floor to mean that Mustafa, he back in market. I look at tear come down to vein and go back in skin like rain go to ground. And when I look at kitchen, I see flour on floor, on stove, on counter. And when I look at Ezra feet, I see blue nail polish and flour too, on toe, in nail. She smell like cigarette when she come close. I see her vein, blue, flour spot, and I see she put hand to my head and she take hair from my eye.

I make you white cheese pastry, Ezra say and one more tear, it fall to vein and go away. I think of honey and how it stick to top of my tongue. And I think of flour, how it bake when dough and it become gold. And I think how water, how I remember my city far away it blue too, like Ezra vein.

*Ne guzelsin*, I say to her and take finger to touch river. She do not move, she do not breath. She let me take from vein drop of blue.

## Celebrity

### *Pastis*

Turn on the TV, all you see is me, Lawn superstar jumps into a star lit sky. It's not cause I'm pompous. That's just how it is. You got red hair, so do I. You know how it is. How long's your do when down? Mine's signature. Maybe it doesn't matter for you. But like this one time I was in the john, ripped a quickie, too much green tea, zipping, and this dude walks in all like hey ma'am woah I'm sorry. Walks out. Like he doesn't even spot the urinals. Just thinks I'm a crazy chick pissing backwards or some shit. Look, watch me flip it. Bam. See how my locks fill the air? Feel that breeze? It's what I call force. Force of the red. Like it propellers me in air. Zoom straight off, off the earth and Lawn's one with the stratosphere. Atmospheric majesty. Put that down. That's a good line. Lawn's got celestial power. His red hair signs the frosted slopes with grandeur. Man, if I could be anything else, that's something you ask right? If I could be another me, I'd be mad poetry. Always had it in me.

(Third grade Mrs. Lovetree told me I got a way with words. She was fine too, Mrs. Lovetree. Pale lean leg's and sexy pumps. Glasses too. Made all our tiny organs feel something. Plus how she'd rub my head after I read a poem for the class. Lawn had a buzz cut back then. A fire buzz cut and she'd rub it, *very good very good Lawn.*)

Course, poetry's a bore, and the board's more chronic. When the board's under you, after school practice, trees all frozen, that's poetry. Follow the fall line, dip down low, feel the cascade of the hill and just three sixty. That easy. Funny, that lady behind us, she's got red hair too. Long and bouncy like Lawn's, not straight like yours. Think

she knows who I am? Bet she does. Turn on the TV. Half pipe glory. Hey, you think these prawns come from China or the Baltic Sea? Some shit like that. Eat them skin, eyes, whiskers and all. Hey waiter, more wine. Fill her up. White right? I'm good with the Green Tea. Gotta keep form. No boozing for Lawn. Lawn's pro.

(We're at Pastis. Sunday Brunch. Got my phone off. One on one down time. Lawn face time. This magazine chick asks me this and that but I know what she wants. She wants to feel my vibe and I can feel hers. Like fated, this red head with red lips and serious glasses slipped down her nose. What's her name, Charmaine. Champagne. Charlemagne. Charming. That's what I said too, first thing. She sticks out her hand, red nails. I'm Charmaine. Charming, I say, skid, slide off my skateboard outside, whip my hair around. That was smooth, I know. Now Char's watching me chow these prawns. Hungry beast, she thinks. Hungry, sexy beast chomps down prawns. I smack the last drop of lemon sauce, slide my board under the table, back and forth with my feet. Hungry to get back on, ride the waves of faces, the concrete half-pipe of Broadway. A mid-morning sun. Crowds out on streets. On the prowl. Celebrity central. Char picks at some tartar shit, tuna, girls choice meat. Char has fine limbs too, swings them in criss-cross a bit to the rhythm of my wheels. We're on to each other, I can see it in her glasses, the way she makes sure her lipstick stays, dainty tulip sips of wine. Char switches with her tape recorder. Remember Lawn, enunciate. Mrs. Lovetree was all about that. Linger on those vowels. Deliver. I would try not to stare down to her legs, great legs like Charmaine. And now I look close, Char has the same itchy bitsy crow's feet too. Mrs. Lovetree would bend over my page, point to a word, *repeat after me*. Three tiny lines, right where the lenses

are. Like how each time a word is enunciated, the vowel of Long a long, long yawm. Enunciate and the crows flex into a flower.)

Sure, sometimes it gets mad aggravating. Like I'm on Fifth, on my board, waiting for red, these mad prom girls in their Jersey limo. Look it's Lawn, look it's Lawn. I'm like no please, don't roll down the damn window and like bam light turns green, Lawn's gone. Down fifth, midtown swivel, swerve all around. Lost. Lawn's lost. You can't catch me baby. Try it.

(Char has this twingy thing with her lips, those red ones. Switches legs. I feel her breeze under the table. I stop my board to feel that breeze. Swish my hair and give Char a long Lawn look under my trucker brim.)

Girlfriend? Nah. Don't get caught mid-fellatio with groupies either. They got cameras, wireless, interspatial shit all over. Know what I mean? Listen baby, Lawn's straight. Tea and seafood. Gotta stay slim for those backwards flips, sub-zero Canada, ice-packed Alps, pow-pow Blue Jay's of Rockies . Gotta stay top of game top of big air x-factor. Party is fun and all but it's the game for me.

(Char takes out a camera. Tells me to take off the hat. Char, I'll take it off for you, anything you name it. Course she plays it cool now, one of those cold journal girls. Thinks in blue lines, ink, deadlines. Her tartar's halfway done. But Charmaine has plans. She knows the deal. I do a profile, jut out my chin. It's got a good cleft. Char's finished her wine. Waiter, waiter. The red lady behind is gone. More wine, for Char. I can feel her buzz coming on to me. She keeps switching her legs. Those smooth limbs. Lawn's feeling it too, the swish, her lipstick, the way her hair falls over her glasses when she leans forward.)



Dessert? Coffee? No? Crème Brule? Espresso? Double shot? You look like a double shot girl, knew it. What's that? That's right, turn the tape back on. Sure thing. Got me a large pad in Malibu. Come visit some time. Infinity pool out to the ocean. Been workin on the surfin. Like the waves one God angry fluid enigma Pacific blue. Ever seen it? It's like the color of your eyes, that blue. Pure.

(Char's got these topaz lookers, pure Hawaiian, Mediterranean, Norwegian, who knows. Just fierce stellar sky rockets.)

Infinity blue, guest rooms you take your pick. I know just the one. Vivian Tam designed the bed spread. All the right colors. But I don't blame you. This city is paramount. Take late nights. Just hand a cabbie the key. Next minute you're in the suite. I like the Hudson. Roof top. Girls in halters. Bankers to laugh at, makes you zonk right out. Lullaby sleep. And those mornings where the sun rises across Jersey. Downtown slow lit up. Rosy finger tips of dawn, and all. Gotta own it. That's my main project now. Just hooked a place. A real looker on the Upper East. Sure, a bit stodgy, how they say. But class is Lawn's main stay. Numero uno priority. It's got a wrap around. Lemme show you Primo real estate. Town car waiting. Let's go.

### *Park Avenue*

(Char Char's put her hair down and it's short, but real red, no roots, true smooth. Bit of wave too. This silky flame on the ebony leather of the car. My board's between us on the seat, a solid in-between barrier. I slink back when we're on the River, tell Xavier to pump that Venezuelan underground drum demo. Char's feeling it. I can feel it. I can feel the vibe. She's got those legs still in criss-cross, her comfort zone I know, but

stretched out good, heels tucked almost under the front seat. We roll down the back windows and Xavier speeds on beat with drums through the midtown tunnel.

Charmaine's flames whip up around her face, and my firework curls lash out and for a moment it's like we got our minds interlocked, lock on lock, strand on strand. She's got the tape off. All off record now. Just her type of melody. She sings with her legs, their ivory pretty calves. It's like a mad, secret dance until we're back out, pristine Park, sun that melts. She turns it back on. What the hell. )

Sure, it's off season now. Then hit the slopes. They got me a secret half pipe built into the Rockies. One hour drive out, back from the cabin. Can't tell you the address, course, but maybe you can come visit. Fly you in. But no party then. Don't know if you can dig. Real rustic deal, pelt furnace, zero phone service, elk antlers and blues bonfire, all that good stuff. Wake up with dark, go to bed with light. How Lawn wins those babies. But it's not about the medals, not like you think.

(I look at the window, shut my trap. Effect. All about effect. The drums jut out, coy in, flutter. Portuguese back narration. Mid-Sunday afternoon. Wide uptown. Check it. Xavier pulls up. Doorman opens. Char takes her legs out. They're yellow against the pavement. Tar and skin and sex. Smell it. I follow her, leave the board with Xavier.

White-glove, Penthouse, pronto, tip top. Char Char purrs, I swear. Takes photos. One of Lawn with this deep gaze way out to Brooklyn. Another of Lawn flipping his hair, in the backdrop the empty wood floors and the smack new all glass California doors that reflect a water tower skyline brilliance. We're on the terrace. Inside is all emptied out. Redwood polished floors. Fireplace. Steel kitchen. Seven foot pre-war ceilings. Char switches on

and I want to switch her on, like press a button, sweep her up, place those alabaster legs on the ledge where we almost fall from sweet love.)

Secret between me and you, okay? Off the record. Take last year in Cannes. I was like the play boy for this special edition sports shorts. Had me on big screen with starlets all around owing awing. The after party all Euro style. Dirty smoke all around, this girl comes up to me with her secret voice, says, I'll give you fellatio with your medals in my mouth Lawn. Lawn this Lawn that. Can't get with this cat that way. Call it straight lace or clean, way I roll.

(Char's silent to soak it in, switches off. Not that I lie. Real secret is, none of that matters. It's the game that they love too. Like a vertical three-sixty in the air, straight as hell, land back exact same spot on pipe, the sweet midway swell on downhill curvature. Like show power, snow like magic powder just falling off all around. You can't practice that—pure improve genius. That's what Mrs. Lovetree said. Improvise Lawn, from your head. And then she'd rub my boyhood buzz cut and the words flowed. Like how Char smiles, a picture in the head of us two in one fireball. The crows feet bloom. I take Char by the small of her back. It does a nice dip, a mogul valley right by her hip bones. But I won't touch those just yet. Improvise, imagine. All in the head. I take her off the terrace, back inside. I show her where will be what, just imagine. Leopard print chairs, couches, tables, pedestals, statues. Char takes her glasses, props them on her loose red hair. She's warm and lose now. Falls into the run rays that build up between us. Her pale skin shines in uptown glory. She arches two cool crow's feet brows, pops the tape back on.)

I see a flat screen there, above the mantel. A wrap around pure white lounge. A fountain with frogs. And the bedroom. Check this set-up. A low tier zen bed, one of those

flat deals, intense silk, maroon maybe, drapes. More leopard print? Nah, zebra here. From Africa. Which happens to be next on Lawn's agenda. African safari. Got it booked for August, before training. All in the works. Have to keep at it, keep going, make it real, feel me? Let's move on. Got a meeting with my fashion label. The real deal. You'll love it. Trust me.

*Barney's*

(Xavier rolls us out. Midday by now, too hot to slide the board. Plus Charmaine's right next to me, can't miss that, the space between us next to nothing now. I choose a new beat, Mingus fused with bee-bop hipsters from Brooklyn. I can see small sweat beauty beads on Char's fore head, around the soft baby hairs that flutter out in red flames. She rubs the beads out with her fingers, fans with her hands. I push the board aside, get rid of all barriers. I roll down all the windows. I want to see the wind dry her, make her hair wild. It's too stellar for talk so I just lounge back, all cool, I don't look at her when she looks at me because that's better. Just let it all sink, sling back, feel the air and the street and the city with Mingus right there. It sounds like Mrs. Lovetree and Char all knotted in one. White legs that cling sweat of sweet crow eyed women who pour from glasses onto paper through words. Words I want to whisper in her ear, in between our red flames. Make her hold out my vowel real long and strong like a sexy yawn right here right now with these fumes of the busses and cabbies so far from elevation. The trees lined one on one, solitary islands down Park who say please just jump you to her, her to you. When Xavier pulls up front, I snap out of it just enough to make it to the showroom.

But it will be real, smell her sizzle when she follows me into the air conditioned mecca.  
Top of Barney's. Private showings only.)

Louis, the design manager, say hi, shake hands. Hey Lou, bring us a bottle of bubs. Lou does all the hand work, makes it real. Good guy. But it's all in here, right here in Lawn. Idea in the core, is the core, feel me? What makes it, all the magic, happen. It's like a punk urban boarder look mixed up with a mountain wood chopper dirty real deal type of neo-macho. You got the mesh sleeve top plus the Bermudas paired with canvas high-tops. The two piece office look? Got me thinking like this black jean boot cut plus dinner jacket plus neon blue collar. All evokes a type of northwest sky, peaks in clouds, cowboy country. All from one mind, Lawn's mind. Make that clear.

(Char strolls the looks, flips some fabric books, snaps shots. She digs. I take the bottle from Lou, show him the door, lock it. Check it. Pop that top, bang. Charmaine turns around, big eyes, heels suddenly off, leans real close to a mannequin. That's right. Low-down time. I let it spray some on the ground for after shock, pour up, make her put the recorder away, make her take her glasses off, make her put it in my hand, promise to give back. We drink to each other. Eyes locked, red head to red head. We stand real close to this awesome blue boudoir velvet robe on the mannequin, chest barred open. She rubs her hand on the velvet, up and down. I want to eat her crow's feet, can feel her breath, can see sweat beads begin.)

Can I ask you something? Char? Can I call you that? Can I touch your face, over here, right by your eye? It's so beautiful that corner, that corner of your eye. Did you know? Always dreamt, always dreamt how soft it would be. Don't mind do you, me pressing your eyelids like that? Sure, it's okay. He's out for lunch. Won't be back. Just us

now. Just don't speak, don't move, Char, Charmaine. Queen of my Red, lady of my locks, woman of my words.

(I whisper this last part, just the way I wanted, just to really get her, right into her ear. We're face to face, Char and Lawn, and she wants to move away at first but I hold her hands tight and move her onto Louis's sketch table. Just push away all the books, pens, fabrics, make them just disappear onto the ground when I push her down, push us down, me on top of her. When I lick her sweat beads, they taste of flesh, a hint of very ripe red strawberry, fresh from fields, a bit thorny, ready to pluck. My mouth begins to water just with the thought. I like her hair, like her white skin, like her lines in the sockets of her face. Charmaine wiggles a bit beneath me and closes her eyes shut real good, squeezes them to make the crows feet dig into my eyes. She knows how that will make me go. I think of Mrs. Lovetree when I kiss those red lips, when I take my hair, let it all hang loose onto the now bare white as hell breasts. We're on a school desk and her glasses fall to the ground, crash, break, the sound of chalk against a blackboard. The sound of long, red, perfect painted nails against a blackboard. I claw the breasts a bit, a forest beast mad after hibernation. The fan that rocks above, the wind chill factor, a free fall gone wrong and here we are on the slope, crashed into one. The room is all white now, ready for avalanche, and I know that when I rub against her she thinks it's the blue velvet against her hands, her mouth against my hand that holds her breath back. I pick her up and now we're on the ground and the blue velvet falls over us. I continue to mute her. No recording, no words now. Her teeth bite into my fingers, bleed into her glasses that I've pick back up and begin to grind against gums.)

## The Fall

No one's named Doris, I say. She has too much blue eye shadow on. Makes her look all owl what with her pointed nose and shimmer lip-gloss, a perfect beak.

I am, she says. She takes up her cupcake and does a bird bite. Go figure she picks the blue frosting and vanilla cake kind. Because it matches, bet that's what she thinks. Fingernails painted electric orange, cuticles gnawed to red flesh.

You and my grandmother, I say. Doris shrugs bony shoulders. I can see the collar bones pop out, jump up to her shiny beak. Why do all the freaks have to choose me? Like this one. Did I mention the bright red skirt or the purple fishnets?

So was my grandmother, she says. Doris thinks this makes us closer. I excuse myself to the bathroom before she can offer me her electric finger doused in blue frosting. I lock myself in the ladies room because it's a single. I need to get away and check up. I look pale, gray, even for that ambient synergy low light places like to use. Like lewd light can cover up an ugly night. But pale for me is better than dark. Some girls just make me go dark and I have to leave them with the bill. Really, it's not cause I'm mean. Back in the day, meaning when blood still ran, this guy, all pale and palor in the mirror—this guy equaled fierce charm. Never leave a lady stand-up. Hold doors—outwards. Pay. Period. First to call—get her digits, never give. First to follow up. This way you avoid pitfalls and pansy piss parties.

After the fact, I learn what it feels like to be a bit low on the looks department. Not that I lost it, just that now most people can't see. How I miss that constant rush just strutting down streets. Like the six train, mid-morning late commute? Do you know how

fine it is every time a lady checks you? One flash of eyelash and you know she digs. Times that by twenty, just for one ride. Do the math. I was the man.

Due to that fine turn of luck, most days now I don't get one look, not even from a granny. Not even from a child. No hope even from dirty dogs. Except that every now and then a girl will look up and see me. Yes, see me. Let's see, it's two weeks after the incident that this first happens. One of those swelter days in August, Sunday. Big Lexington Avenue street fair. Balloon animal men. Corn dogs. Smelly chorizo. Mexican ice's. Popcorn clutter in gutters. Asthmatic babies that swarm around with snot pistils. A fine, sweaty, Sunday fair. Picture it. I chase children, pop balloons right by inflated baby heads to make them scream. When that gets old, I stand in front of the chorizo stand and hope that with all that evil smell wafting up into and through me maybe I'll get hungry. Pigeons gather at my feet, peck my bare toes through my sandals. This tickles. The vendor tires to shoo them but how can he know it's dead toe hair they are after? And that's when it happens, when she, the first freak, sees me. Tina, that's her name.

Pigeon seducer, Tina says. Tina has stubby alabaster legs, long blond hay country girl hair, and one big bad bosom. Think of those eighteenth century pastoral paintings. Tina's got a deep throttle too. A real milk maid straight up from the belly of mother earth.

Excuse me? I say. I look down at her, her flaxen head, her hefty breasts. I picture how they would lap my hands when fondled.

Watch this, Tina says. She takes rice and throws it at the pigeons. Their frontal areas start to inflate.

They look like you now, I say. It just came out. It doesn't take long to get used to just talking to yourself whenever, wherever the hell you please. No one can hear. Yell



curses, midtown five o'clock happy hour. People keep on the walk, don't even look your way. Except Tina hears all right. She takes insult for flirtation.

You're cute, she says, pinches my butt real quick, throws more rice. The pigeons are about to burst. They ignore my toe hairs now. Rice is better. Like cat nip. Some snotty babies point and start to cry.

I never knew that actually worked, I say to Tina.

Yeah, well, sometimes you really have to go back and learn, Tina says and winks. This is a bad sign, what she says, but I still have to learn that.

Pinch my butt again? I say, trail Tina. Tina gallops her behind away from me, swings her horse hay pony tail. I follow her all the way to the end of the fair where traffic starts again. We reach a subway stop, downtown. I go in with her. After the accident, I learn to walk everywhere. Might as well when rain, cold, muggy crap doesn't make a mark. Plus the train screeches bring on migraines. Now I know why dogs strain their ears and cats huddle for the oddest noise. It's a primal nerve humans have evolutionarily extinguished.

Well, Tina doesn't even look at me on the train. Except that every time the car swings she swaggers her butt and does a little kittenish side grin. After the accident, before Pastoral Tina showed up, not even sex shop movie viewings moved me. Until Tina. Tina with her ass swigs brings it all back. I feel the urge, tell it to wait. Tina does one last butt cackle at Astor Place and heads out. I plug my ears when the train shrieks away and we climb back up to light.

One good thing about this state of being is that really there's nothing to be scared of. I don't really remember much of how it all used to be—except for the hunger and the

urge—but I do know that there was fright too. Dark, empty streets. Strange people. Things with eight legs. Cockroaches too. Now, dark alleys embrace me after a lonesome night in a sweaty dance club, allow me to have cigarettes that dangle in the air. And spiders and cockroaches? Somehow they are the only living beings that do see me, that don't threaten to run me over, that scurry in my presence and circumvent my step. And yes, strange people now embrace me too. Tina for example.

Tina takes me to her place, somewhere lost in the octopus of Alphabet city. It's something of a hostel. She has a post card size room with a twin cot. The shared bathroom is down the hall. There are florescent lights in this hall. They cackle and wheeze. This too another grating sound full flesh men and woman are tuned out too. Tina smartly has the fluorescents' off in her hovel, instead she relies on candlelight. Her floor mattress is covered with the constellations.

You wanted your ass pinched? Tina says this and double bolts the door. She pushes me on the bed. Remember that after the fair, save for the buttocks bumps on the train, she'd all but acted like I am ghost.

I did want that, I say, turn over to wait for the pinch. A bit too eager on my part, I know. It's just that since the accident, touch like fright and urge and what not ceased (save for pigeon tickles). Try as I may, collisions with cars, attempts to jump from roof top to roof top, all that super man stuff. Nope. Sure, I fall, get run over, have fingers squished. But then I just brush off and continue. No pain whatsoever. But that pinch. When Tina pinches it's the tightest Indian burn rose bud on your arm type of little glory pain ever.

I turn back around. Tina is stripped to a black corsage and garters. No whip. Just her glorious gifts in her tiny room, the force of her hair mane cascaded into the night, and her behind twitching to be touched. Yes, Tina in her tiny room with her twin cot brings on phrases like these. She stands there with an evil grin on her honest peasant face and I feel myself rise, almost become man again.

You know why I can see you, Tina says, cocks an eyebrow. I shake my head. When a man is turned on, mute is the word.

I can see you because I was one of them, Tina says. I zero in on her cleavage all perspiration and bunched fat.

One of your girls, one of them who pushed you in, one of those poor girls you screwed over, you bastard. Tina says all this with a very level voice.

Want me to take off my bra? She whispers into my ear. Tina's sweat particles fall onto my lip but I'm too weak to lick it. I can't help it. Tina starts to hiss right into my face, pushes me back onto the bed.

I was the one who pushed you out the window, she hisses. You who thought he could have but never give. You monster.

I'm in pain from want, but Tina has no mercy. She drags me by my sandals, my toes, those very toes the pigeons brought us together with. She tosses me into the hallway, slams the door in my face. My last image of Tina is with her rockets swung in full force with teensy whippy hay tornadoes fallen from her head. I'm left with florescent grinded to my enamel and the tortuous pain of a man left half filled.

So maybe, pre-accident, I wasn't the tip toppest gentleman out there. After Tina, I get to thinking that maybe, just maybe, the fact that I miss that rush, that constant high of

good looks and womanly love, is because in the subaltern states of existence, the survival drug of choice is denied. Like a rummy, no booze. Or a jazzier, no blow. Except that somehow because of the way it all came down, I'm in this loophole hell where I get a bad trip once in a blue moon.

After Tina, there's Tilda. It's been two weeks. I walk around Grand Central, watch the clocks tock off the trains, try to map out some logic to the amount of people who cross one another between the hours of such and such and in what speed or face expression. Nonsense like this. I also stand next to the ear hole, the one where you can hear the other person across the hall. Some architectural malfunction or miracle. It's by the oyster bar where I lick off the salty goodness of discarded shells. Salt is the one thing I sometimes crave. And that's how I meet Miss Matilda, licking iodine with an ear stuck to a wall. Or re-meet, I guess. It's past midnight transit, mid-week.

Yoo-hoo, I say into the hole in a low manly ghost way. Then I tune in my ear.

Oh it's you, says a nice flippant female falsetto.

Who?

You, she says. Wait, I'll be right there.

I turn around. Tilda is in my face. Her breath smells butterscotch. Tilda is pretty much the opposite of Tina. Tilda is real svelte, size two, shoe three quarters of five. She has ten teeny lobe hoops on her left ear. Tilda, ever the quaint fairy, takes me to the nearest ladies room. We snuggle into a stall. She slams the lid of the john down and sits on it, lifts legs to an upward straddle for full revelation. Tilda always did go commando. I kneel to her. Her shrine is cinnamon cotton candy. Makes me start to salivate. Tilda slaps my mouth, takes on a mock deep man voice.

Listen girl, she says. Listen girl, you know we, know this, can't last long. Tomorrow's the trip to Estonia to meet Queen Mother. Yes, me, yours truly, Prince of Estonia, has been the king of your candy cane pleasure. But it's got to be over doll, I'm sorry.

Tilda takes her legs out of stretch and strikes her heels into my groin. I bowel over, vomit dust, ghost phlegm. If only she could stay straddled like that forever on Grand Central sewage with me hypnotized by her red flares. Tilda makes a disgust face, stands up, switches to her real helium female voice.

Well Prince, how does it feel to fall down forty floors? I always wondered. It was my idea. My idea, you whore.

Tilda says this in her petite way. Then she kicks me once more, unbolts the stall and walks out. I regurgitate up a mini cyclone of bone shit. It leaves a visible stain. Grand Central ladies room, ground level, west exit.

After Tilda, it's onslaught. There's Calista who spots me browsing ties in Bloomingdales. This is an old habit of mine. Or so I assume because every day I find myself drawn to idle away an hour or so in the men's department. You know, that basement sprawl always so empty save for girlfriends who search for a birthday boyfriend gift, and the lonely clerk who wishes to please. Calista is a Connecticut brownie type with a pixie cut and two skinny arms and pearl earrings. I'm debating between two ties when she pops up.

The blue pin stripe over the plain pink, for sure, Calista says. She makes a cute face, casts her bangs aside with a flick of polish. It's un-chipped French Manicure as usual. No deep purple grunge for her. Not one for fads, just classic.

You think? I hold up the stripped tie to my chin. The lonely clerk hovers about ready to pounce.

Oh yes, Calista says, grabs it from me and heads to the register. The clerk scurries behind.

Wrap it too, for effect, Calista directs. My boyfriend's birthday, she adds.

This is a good choice, a solid fit, the clerk says. Calista pulls out a fifty, stuffs the change into her bra. The clerk puts the tie in a flat box and ties a white ribbon around it.

How old is he? The clerk asks.

Ageless, Calista says, flip-flops away. I follow.

Calista like Tilda takes me home. Except it's her aunt's uptown pied-a-terre. The aunt spends most of the time in Greenwich, keeps a large grey Siamese on watch in the city.

Mao likes you, remember? Calista says, takes off her earrings, ruffles her bob, stretches out her feet. Mao circles my feet, tries to eat my toe hairs. I should see where this will end.

Suck my toes, Calista demands, elongates on a plush Tiffany blue couch. When I have her big toe between two molars, she jams her foot down my throat. Mao screeches, pounces on my back. I want to regurgitate.

Eat him, eat him! Calista screams. Mao digs in his claws.

That feel good Prince charming? Calista starts on a monologue, each sentence finished with a kick down my throat.

That feel good? Remember how The Prince needed his foot message? Well take that. Take that Prince. Love, hell. Hell to you. How'd it feel to fall, hit your ass, and die?

I sure liked it. Take that love boat. Take that love hound. Take that you dirty pimp. Let's see you do it again. I'm the one who thought of it, you know. To kill you like that. Let's see it again.

Mao jumps away, starts to lick himself. Calista takes her foot out of me. I let her drag me to the open window. I'm just dust anyway so her puny yogi arms swing me up no problem and toss. It does feel like a flight down pillows onto Madison. I fall next to a black poodle and his recent pile of turd. The poodle licks my face then licks his behind. I can see Calista way up above. And Mao in her fine, ferocious arms. They wave and I wave back but by then I am invisible to all once more.

Walda, Liza and Geralda come after. I start to hate myself for my former taste. Why do they all end with the letter a? Why always the public encounter? Walda by the oversized stuffed squid in FAO. Liza amidst the posed financiers in Tao. Geralda and a cigarette outside Lotus. Walda is Polish and eats only ice cream. Liza, from Ojai, a master of Kuma Sutra. And Geralda, a pack a day, dances every single night away. They come to me, whisper in my ear, usher me through a night, entice me up into day. My dusted self is cremated over and over through their violent love. I call it love because that is what it is. Or what it was. Through them, I piece myself together.

There was no other way. I had it coming. A surprise birthday party. All the girls greet me when I walk in. Propped on chairs, tables, the television, pole dancing with the statue, humping the lamp shades.

Take your clothes off, they coo. Take these lines, they chew. Funnel this Don Per, they slur. I'm in heaven already. Only thing left is the final fall. They wait for my imminent stupor. Tina gives the cue, Tilda does the heave ho. Calista calls the cues. The

fall is a millisecond. After, I stand in a crowd in Times Square. Two sandaled, toe haired feet drift me through a yawned summer crowd.

I drift the crowd, emerge in the fair, fall into the electronic night. It rewinds and replays. Until Doris and the cupcake shop. Doris with her blue cupcake and blue eyes sits across from me. Doris, Doris. This is why I ask, or tell her, no one's named Doris. Which means more like none of those other one's had an off suffix. I tell myself this to my graying ghost image in the cupcake place bathroom. That no letter a, that this must be a good omen. A difference. I fight my fade and refocus. Doris has finished the blue frosted cupcake when I get back. There is a bit on the side of her mouth. I let it stay. It matches her grotesque blue eye shadow. Doris doesn't even blink at my absence. She snaps at the waiter, looks at me, pops out a Benjamin.

Take the change, Doris says to him. He does this stupefied bow to her.

It's a snapshot, Doris says, looks down at our feet under the round white table.

Is it? I look down too. I've got my sandals sprawled toward her, toe hairs and all. And she has her criss crossed legs in the purple fishnets in between my ghastly Neanderthal hairiness.

It does fit, I say.

Doris takes a Polaroid. When she shows it to me it's just her fish scale, her fish net leg under a white round table. I am undocumentable, dust under dust in desert wind.

And then, like that, we are back at the Doris's apartment. The frosting has started to crack her lips. Every so often I see a piece disappear into the darkness. Doris lives underground. We take a flight of steps down into a laundry storage room place of a cracked out brownstone in the high hundreds off CPW. There is a rattle tattle of a dryer,



the smell of softener, and a flicker of a light bulb. Cages creep backwards filled with tricycles, torn luggage, stacked chairs, an inflated pool float, three racks of figure skates, two dilapidated golf clubs.

Just back this way, Doris whispers. She takes off her shoes, walks in fish net soles. I follow her lead, hold my sandals, expose my toes.

Must we whisper?

Don't you remember? Doris takes out a kaleidoscope of keys, picks out one, plugs it into a cage. This cage is empty.

You live in a cage.

Doris rolls her eyes back at me. She clanks the cage door after me. It makes a grand badaboom. At the end of the cage is a door, which Doris opens with her key. When I walk inside, there is a kitchen to our left, a living room up front, an inlet that holds the queen bed. Two windows look out into the courtyard. The shapes of the trash bins shine under some moon. Doris pulls a curtain over, points to another door.

The toilet, she says, picks at her mouth, flicks away the rest of the frost.

Yes, I say, take the cue, fall into the bathroom. I'm no gray or black, just me. The same kind of face no difference ghost or not, the same kind of face. Face that happens when you spend too much night away with no end in sight, no booze to ease it out. Doris has got a rubber yellow ducky collection going on in the tub. A million of them lie inside, ready to be floated. I splash a douse of cold water just to make sure and they start to bounce.

Want some cognac? Doris has read my mind. When I'm out, she is naked on her bed, flask in hand, blue eyelids, purple fishnets, lounged with elbows propped. I sit on the

bed. The spread is blue, white clouds. Doris hands me the bottle. I swig, pass, she swigs. The drink goes through me and evaporates.

Why are you different? I say this to the curtained window and a black TV screen decorated with blue rubber ducks.

I'm your girl that says don't do it, Doris says. Her two fish net feet fall into my lap. They are small with parabola arches. Her toes wiggle, unpainted. There is a big, bulbous bunion out of her left foot. Doris starts to speak. I imagine how the bunion would pop, deflate, sagged skin left with a flood of gooey, oozy pus. Doris goes on.

I'm the girl that says no don't, he won't remember, what difference will it make. You are beyond your body, eyes sunk, a mound of flesh. I start to scream when Tilda starts to pull you from your arms toward the window. The couches were stuck right to the sill, see, it was a no brainer. Tina shoes me into a wall, takes my purse, locks me in the bathroom. I turn the shower so I won't hear. The last thing I hear is Calista's shrill in a chant of Let Him Bleed.

Why didn't you go to the police? I ask this, look down at the bunion. Doris wiggles.

Why? It's simple, you love me.

I turn to look at her. Her breasts paler than the rest of her, small, with rose tip buds. Her collarbones luminous even in dimness. She's rubbed her lipstick off and the blue shadow is dulled. And Doris has the longest lashes ever. When she looks down her nose they extend into cat whiskers.

A lot of times, I lie in the dark and look at the patterns, Doris says, turns off her bedside lamp. It's a big lava lamp, rotates on the ceiling, makes circles that interlace a palette.

Me too, I say, lie down next to her. I watch the lava merge, interlock, explode into pin points of paint. Doris is a silent breather, a simulation of death. She takes her bunion and rubs it up and down my own arch. The bubbles convene. Doris is the sky all around. Blue half moons of eyelids, arid meteors of soles, lean cut out stars of bone. And the bunion a full moon. Her long lashes are the secret spaces of black nebula. I begin to understand her story, what she has said. I let myself seep into the night and drain into the sheets.

## The Tourist

That's right, you read the sign right, Cross-eyed Fish-catching Cat Street. Don't mind me. I'm just an old man who likes the late day sun. You can find me here every day of the warm season, when the sun shines once a day all the way down, all the way down to the end, if you sit right here in the middle. Wait for the miracle. For a minute you get blessed with God's beam from heaven.

The secret is to keep very still and very quiet. Only allow the noise of your eyelids to go open, like this, then quick close, like that. Make a wish and then dream of how it will come to you. Look straight, don't be cowardly, let it blind you. Close tight, like this, with all the lines of your old age, listen to the sound of the masts down there of the sailboats that go with the tourists to the islands. Hear the water slap against the boat. I dream that I am again on a sailboat and I lie on the deck. That I am brown like the boys, like my son, down below and that a beautiful woman with long, long, hair looks down on me.

But that's right, you want to know why this is the Cross-eyed Fish-catching Cat Street. It's not really a street, more an alley. You can see for yourself. But it goes a very, very far way, the way a cat's tail can start on his back then whish and whoop around so that he can feel all the corners and steps of the dark world. Just a cat's tail alley, made out of two buildings that decided not to touch. The laundry lines with white sheets flap in the wind that comes from the islands. They are the sails of the alley. That's why I have that wish maybe, to be on top a boat, at the very top, a free captain of the sea with a mermaid.

Because when I sit here and welcome the sun I am the captain and in a way maybe you can say I protect the ship, this lost alley.

Let's see if I can remember it the way it exactly happened. Some months ago. A good early spring day, not too hot like today. But sun still all around, and here I sit just like now patient for the miracle. I watch some tourists pass, the children run to get down to the cove and island boat tours. They used to come more from the city, just for the day, people like you, because it is not far, as you know. They tell you it is so quiet here now because of the big resorts next door but don't listen to that. I will tell you the truth. The truth is because of the fish. If you notice, the restaurants, they do not sell much fish, but more of things like fried mussels and sardines. But before, all along the docks and on the dinghies, they would grill fish, fresh with just lemon and maybe some red onion. A cold bottle of beer. A slice or two of potato. If you knew the secret, you could even just grab a fish from below the boats with a net. Like this, aha, in your net. Ah, it melts in the mouth, enters the blood and give you strength. But when the resorts come, the farms for the fish come too, and all our fish here go away.

But I try not to think of these things too much now. The heart of an old man is glass. Try and tell these things to the young hot bloods who run the boats, like my son. They don't care. To them all that matters is the next disco. I was, I know, the same way. But I wasn't that young that day, the day I sat here like I sit today. Because if I was young, even today, I would go and catch ten fish with my own hands! But this is why I can tell you this story. Because you are young too, like my son. You want to go away, always. You leave your city, your mother and father, your girlfriend maybe, and come here and tomorrow you will go for hours in your car and you will reach another cove. Or

maybe you will get lost and instead you will find a beach with waves. And only much later will you sit and wait and see that maybe it is enough to just sit and wait. That way I see what you cannot. You walk by but I sit and I see you. And only because you have a special kind of vision, there in your camera, you've taught yourself to stop every now and then and stand silent in that way behind your third eye.

Enough! You are tired and you want a cold drink. Me too. Here it is then. Here I sit in the summer sun and watch the tourists go by. Ten years ago, around then. And there out of the corner of my eye, half closed, half open, the way it is with eyes that are drunk with sun. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of white that brushes against my ankle and goes behind me, down the alley. White like the sheets that hang on the lines. And so I jump up, and look back, that way, way back down and down the cat tail alley until I reach the curve you see, where it goes left and you can no longer see. But there is nothing, just like now. But I did see a flash of white, and so I feel I have to find its reason. Because of this I can no longer just sit back and wait and sleep in the sun and think of the sun on me on the stern of my boat with the mermaid. Now I wait, sit up straight, like this, because I know the white flash will come again. I don't have to wait very long. I feel something brush my leg, right here, right above my ankle. Of course maybe you have already guessed, but it is the tail of a cat, a little white cat, a flash of snow in the summer heat that runs out of the alley, back up the street.

They used to be all over, every stoop you pass, another cat. Now, not so much. They survive on the grandmothers who give them milk every morning. In spring the mothers always fat and sick, breasts low enough to suck up the dirty water from the gutters, the fish bones and rotten fruit and sometimes a rat tail or two. The white one is

one of the babies, raised on milk. Maybe it was born under that apartment house, that one over there, with the green paint. Or the other one past it with the orange. I can't say. They change the paint here every day it seems now to cover the holes, to make it very neat for the resort tourists. That is why they have left us lonely here, the cats. There is no need for them when the paint is fresh and the holes are gone and the gutters are clean and the fish is gone.

Well, when the hole of the green apartment building was still open, the little white cat with the soft paint brush tip of tail was born inside with his brothers and his sisters. Of course he does not remember how he spent days and days with his eyes closed, the darkness around him the only light he learned. His mother's pain, how her children sucked her dry, did not matter to him. Her belly was still soft, a cushion against his hunger to push against.

Suddenly, one day he wakes up and his mother is gone and his brothers and sisters are gone. He is alone in the hole, a damp grave. A light shoots at him, stings the darkness. He follows the light, falls out of the grave and rolls into the sun, rolls around and around on cobblestone, broken, uneven, in and out under his fur, better than the licks of his mother. Where he goes next, who knows. To the smell of salt by the water most likely and the smell of the fish that the salt promises. But his birth hole, over there, or the other one, that is where he goes back to, every day.

Why then, I ask myself, why does he come back this way and to this alley? There is nothing down this small, stupid alley that is of any good.

Like I told you, there is not much back there. Sure, it's the best spot in town to catch the rays in quiet. My brother Jan, my best friend, bless his soul, gone two years

now. Jan had a market up the block, closed now too. Coffee, eggs, pasta, the usual things. Beer in coolers. We would get the cold beer from Jan after we cleaned off the boats and sit and talk and drink, watch the sun set. Only twenty cents a beer back then. I could drink ten in one night. Like spinach to me. The way with the blood of the boat boys here. I know it from my son, shares his father's blood. You sweat and work with the sun and then you are strong for the whole night! They still have a disco or two down below. I can hear the music, Fridays, Saturdays, boom, boom. It comes into the walls, believe me, makes the floor shake. But I don't complain because I know it is the young blood that shakes and that is what keeps all of us alive. I won't ask you, if you go there and make that noise, because you will say no to save old ears like mine. But I know. I give my son my blessing and tell him to dance just like his father did till morning.

And our white cat, young blood, hot with hunger, the damp soil and dark hole he was born into—he too, I think to myself, he too must be in fever to dance. Maybe down this nothing alley, there is a cat club. A cave where all the curious meet. A secret meeting place where they roll together in soil, a special soft soil because of the drain that drips from the sink of a basement apartment. It is so far back in the alley that the breeze of the sea never makes it there and on cold nights when the wind rocks the boats this way, that way, and the fog comes in and covers the streets, this is when the young cats all dance together in the cave. But it is good in the warm spring too, like that day our cat brushes my ankle, a day when it is so hot that old men fall asleep and forget to drink water. Days like that the club is cool and the perfect place to nap. No flies too.

So I wait the next day, like the day before and the day before, right in the middle of the entrance of the alley. But this time it's not to doze into old age but with a fan in



hand like a grandmother and a bucket of water to throw some on myself every now and then. I don't even eat. Not one pistachio or one roasted corn kernel. Because you know how that goes—one bite and then one more and another and another until you fall asleep, fat and happy. No, I take small sips of water and put my worry beads in my pocket just in case. That is the trick you know, to fast. To keep away hunger, play with the beads. This is how the religious say they find God.

Don't get me wrong. I am not a religious man. I only took on the fast when I started to get old, when the belly started to grow. And then I would cheat. Drink water, and use beads. A bad combination.

Well, here I sit with my beads just like a religious fool but it's a little white cat I wait for. Sure enough there he comes straight for us, from the street, move aside, a little white fast ghost. Do you see, look, something large sticks out from both sides of his mouth. I can't make it out with the sun that shines behind him but when he gets close, you see, it is a fish! A large fish with scales still silver and tail still that goes like this with life. Back and forth, caught in our cat's mouth. And still closer, now you see, how our cat is white, in every possible way. Whiskers that are invisible. Fur that has not one grey hair. It even covers all of his mouth and ears so that there is no pink like with other cats. But it is his eyes that are the most unbelievable. Look, they are clouds, like clouds that come and go over the sun on a windy day. Or the froth of the waves on the open ocean when you ride to the islands. No dark inside, no tiny black beads. And just like the wind, watch, our cat rubs the tip of his tail against my ankle and there he goes, disappears down the alley, do you see, to the secret cave.

And now, I sit back, lift my head to the sun, close my eyes and play with the beads in my pocket. I feel the sun make dark circles into my eyes, round like the beads, black holes that dance around each other. How does the white cat with the clouds that dance in his eyes underneath the sun catch a big fish? The cove is dried up. Like I say, it was not like it used to be, cats all over, this and that way from under every house, fish always in their mouths, stomachs full and fat. No, the ones left skinny like our cat are hungry, fast ghosts. But then I see with the dancing in my own eyes closed to the sun that the cat can see things lost forever in darkness.

Not long ago, they came to the cove to make a new map for the tourists. I tell them, why do you care about this alley? There is nothing back there. A hole or two in the ground. Laundry lines. But they ask me for the name so I tell them, *Balik Tutan Sasi Kedi Sokagi*. They do not ask why, like you. And the next day when I come back to greet the sun, there is a sign up, the one you see right there.

That is the story then. I hope that answers your question. Yes, of course, take a picture. But I must go. My son, bless his soul, brings his old man island fish for dinner. Melts in your mouth, I promise! Just wait till I disappear down the alley please. And on my way, thank you, I will smoke one of your cigarettes. And when you can no longer see me or smell the smell of my smoke, the miracle of the sun will happen. It will hit your camera and light up this alley.

## Baby Doll

I lie by the pool once the sun is out and steady. I can bike up the hill to the clubhouse and lie by the pool and order the caviar, even though I don't eat. The first time I take the bike to the clubhouse, when my husband gives me the bike, my husband tells me to get the caviar. And so I do. I make trails with the eggs on the slab stone that makes the smooth ground around the pool. Then I watch the red ants come, march in file, balance the black egg on their torsos, a marching parade of dark globes. When I look up at the sun it shines right down on me and a falcon circles. And beyond the pool, beyond the houses, beyond the gates I see smog that makes the cactus stalks all fuzzy and every now and then and the falcon hovers above.

But I like to go to the club not just for the caviar and the ants but also because there is a busboy, Hale. Hale smiles at me and does a little bow with his hand behind his back and when he leans down to put the caviar on the table by my lounge chair, I can smell him, his plastic. My husband does not have any smell that I can detect. Not even when he kisses me and we are so close after our morning meditation. Even Sue seamstress or Linda never smell. In fact beyond Hale, all that I can smell is the gardenia bubble soap, the fumes of nail polish, the very first time I wear a new dress, the never before worn type of smell. Or like my box that I lie in when I meditate in mornings with my husband. But Hale, he's not like any of that. Hale smells better than any of that. And because of this I know that Hale is more like me than anyone else I know. Because I can smell myself too, my own plastic too.

Hale and I don't really talk much. But that is okay because of how Hale lets me smell, because I know he lets me, wants me too, when he leans down with the caviar and I can feel him slow down, with the sun, stay bent and close to me like the light above makes him stop. And then when he is back up, walked away, I look up at that sun and try to remember the smell but it is already lost. I stare out into the smog where the falcons fly away into the cacti. I think about how it would be to sit on the falcon's back with Hale holding me from behind and to fly into the smog. Maybe we would burn into the sun, melt together into one. But I'm not really sure. Maybe we would land outside the gates and be together. My husband won't ever let me go outside the gates. He says it is dangerous and dirty and that a breakable beauty like mine would be instantly abused. Like I would dissolve and all that would be left would be wires or eyeballs for the falcons to eat. The falcons circle the air above, against the sun. I think of melted skin on the tan gravel of the earth's floor. And the eyeballs would circle with the movements of the falcon and this is what the falcon craves. To pop eyes with his talons and suck them into his teeth like the ants I know will do with the eggs.

But before the pool, every morning Linda comes to open my eyes for the meditation. And then after she bathes me and paint my toes and toenails. And every night she is there to dress me in the new dress for that night, and to close my eyes when I am to go to bed. The first time I meet Linda, my husband brings her to my room and stands with her above my bed.

You must scrub her clean every day to make sure there is no dirt at all. Like she is fresh out of her box, you understand? He says this to Linda, and she keeps her head down

and nods and I like her already because her hair even though it is up in a bun, I can see it is a dark, brown, not at all like mine.

And she is to be taken care of, her hair, her skin, her nails. You understand? Linda nods again and then my husband leans over and kisses me. When he leaves, Linda raises her head and I see she has nice white teeth and when she comes over and takes my hair in her hands, her fingers brush my neck and I can feel that they are smooth.

I am Linda, she says and then she opens a small black chest slowly, reveals a thousand colors from which I can pick. This is what we do every morning before the geranium bath. Coral and peach polish I like the best. But the purples, so many of them, I like those too. And all the names with stories. Beach Skinny Dip, Purple Pandora, Midnight Peach Cobbler. With the colors I can imagine I am in the magazines my husband lets me read in the library at night. The magazines smell too, sometimes like the geranium soap and sometimes if I think really hard, almost like Hale under the sun. The smell comes best when I turn the pages slowly and the pictures come, one after the other. A girl on a beach or on a sailboat or on the roof of a very, very tall building that touches the sky and the sun too. And so I too lie on a beach like the girls in these pictures, only in my own skin, and my nails are the color of the coral reef that lies beyond. There is no one, no one but me and the sound of the waves, like the sound in my husband's meditation tape. Shooo, hooo. Shooo, hoo. Then all of a sudden there is that soft drum like the rattle of the rattle snake who once sang to me outside the window. I wait for the snake to slide up my leg and curl himself around my neck, wait for the feel of his body against mine, like Linda's hand except a snake made of many hands. Until a shadow

comes over me and the moon has come and with the moon I feel Hale's body lie on top of mine and we are silent like this, his smell spilling into my open mouth.

But before my bath and my nails, after Linda has opened my eyes, I go to meditation with my husband. He says these meditations are to make me ready, that I am not ready, but one day I will be and then we will together create another, just like me.

How pretty she will be! He says. You can braid her hair, he says, and Sue will bring her little dresses.

So every morning I go to his study at the other wing of the house, the dark wing past the kitchen, past the entrance hall, past the dining room, past the library. This is where he waits, sits on the rug in his white robe, one leg crossed at the knee over the other, and palms together on his chest. The study is painted dark blue and there is a picture of the whole world on the ceiling. I stare up at it when we lay down, my husband on the rug, me in my box. The wave music plays for us. My husband keeps his eyes closed but I can't do that on my own. So I wait until the moment when I am stung in the ear. I wait for that moment, and look at the blue that surrounds the white parts of the world above. The white parts are lines that make shapes when they come together, but the blue is just one shape that surrounds the white. There are white, silk drapes too that cover the sun so that it is always half day in the study. When the soft drum comes between the waves, that's when I'm stung in the ear. It stings me right in the belly of my ear. I feel it go straight down me, to the underneath of my foot and this is what I know is pleasure. A wave of pleasure. And there I lie with my husband, with only the sound of a bird outside and the music of the waves and the soft drum. Our palms face the world and

our mouths are closed, our feet turned outward. When we are done, my husband lifts me out of the box, stands me up and kisses my lips.

I go back to my wingback past the library, back past the dining room, back past the entrance, back past the kitchen, and into my room. I sit by my dressing table and comb my hair to wait for Linda.

Which color will it be today, Miss? Says Linda. She sits on the footstool by my dressing table. I can hear the hot water going in the bathtub and the smell of the gardenia bubbles float into the room. We always do the hot bath, the scrub and the hair clean, and after, the nails.

Sue comes today with blue, your husband has chosen blue for you tonight, Linda says.

Each day my husband always sees and chooses the dresses and the colors for the evening. Sometimes he asks that I join him for dinner, or maybe just dessert and coffee and we sit together while he eats. But every night no matter what I join him in the library by the big fireplace where we sit together, me with the magazines with the pictures of the girls in dresses and the beaches with the waves, and he with a newspaper.

Blue like bluejay or maybe skyblue. Or even bluemoonblueberry? I stop combing and look down to the open box. Linda has the three blues out to the side and I think of Sabrina who sings Moon River and it is night and they are in the convertible. Or when she is still the plain Sabrina in the tree and she watches the dance on the tennis court. Once, my husband tells me to watch this movie in the library, on a big screen against a wall. This is a day when the sun suddenly does not come out and instead there is wetness that beats against the windows and a grey cloud that hangs all over. I watch Sabrina in the

library with the books locked in glass cabinets. And late that night instead of the fireplace, when the cloud is gone, my husband takes me out in the moon in his convertible. We drive very slow under the moon on the wet roads inside the gate. He pulls to the side, turns the car off and puts a cold hand on my leg. His hand is not smooth like Linda's but very white under the moon and with very deep creases that cut deep inside and make lumps. The cactuses are still against the stars with many lights very far off beyond the gate.

The bluemoonblueberry, I now point because of Sabrina and her song in the convertible. Linda puts the bottle to the side and smiles with her nice white teeth. I take Linda's hand and we go into the bathtub. I let my gown fall to the ground and get into the hot geranium water. Linda knows to make the water very hot because I like how it makes me red. Linda scrubs my red with the oatmeal grain cloth that digs into me, all over me. Linda always lifts my legs and arms up to get the under regions.

Amazing, amazing, she says when she does this. So smooth, never hair, never dead skin, never that crack of the joint, Linda says. Linda tells me this is the best part about having real legs and arms, the way they crack like nuts every now and then when you move them about. To remind you of God inside you, Linda says. So Linda makes a tock with her tongue when she lifts my legs or arms or bends my head forward to get the neck. Tock, Linda says and I bend.

But I like best how Linda hums while she scrubs me hard and how she wears an orange scarf with white flowers on it to keep back her hair. Linda does not like her hair, she says, how it is so dark and every time it falls there it is, dark and for everyone to see.



No, not like yours, beautiful and golden, no tangles, she says. But her hair to me is beautiful, dark chocolate brown with soft curls and sometimes she lets it down so that I can comb it. I like to do this, to comb her hair which grows all the way down her back. She closes her eyes and this means I know that she likes what I do. I make sure I dig in good and strong at the top of her head until her neck, make sure that the bristles scratch the scalp and the dead skin that I see fall like flakes into the air.

You have a heart here, I know, Linda says to me after. She says this and puts a finger on my chest and closes her eyes.

I feel it, here. And she points to her heart, takes my hand on it so that I can feel it too how a heart beats, one drum after the other, soft but strong like the drum beat under the waves.

Sue seamstress comes later with an evening dress, shoes, gloves. And a present of a new bikini and hat. All is blue, right down to the bottoms of the shoes. Not all the same blue, but different blues, from dark like the wet cloud sky to almost white like the sky in the morning before meditation.

Blue for a Blue Barbie, Sue says and takes a tape measure around my naked waist.

Ah yes, looks like some humidity has come in, Sue sighs and starts the motor on the needle. This needle sting is not like one with my husband in the morning. This needle hurts with no pleasure.

Back to thirty-two and a half we go! Sue puts on the big glasses with the strap that goes around her head and begins the needle on the seams next to my hip bones. This is

where I grow and where I shrink and where the hurt on the needle makes me measure the way I am supposed to.

When she is done, Sue ties the bikini on me, the strings first around my neck, then my chest, then the seams so that the strings when done up in bows hide the marks and sooth the red that comes from the hurt. With the hat over my hair, Sue turns me around to face the mirror. The hat makes a half blue cloud on my face.

Shall we change your eyes too today?

I lie on the bed and let Sue switch my eyes out. For a moment I am left empty, just darkness, the falcon's talon's in hold of my eggs.

Blue, how beautiful, Hale says, bends down, hand behind back, to put the caviar on the table. I look at him under the brim of the hat. There is his smell again, so close to me, almost inside my mouth.

You had green ones yesterday, Hale says, points two fingers to my eyes.

I nod, look into his eyes. They are brown like always.

Both are nice, Hale says, starts to stand back up, away from my eyes, away from my brim.

Wait, I hold onto his arm, want to hold onto his smell.

I only have one pair, one color, one simple color, a simple service toy, you know, not like you.

Above us a falcon circles and the caviar eggs shine in the sun, almost pop in the heat and their black globes match the feathers of the bird against the light.

I take the plate up to Hale, point to the eggs. But Hale just shakes his head.

I can't eat either, he say.

And so I know that I only have different colors for eyes, but that is all. I want to whisper this, really whisper like the intake of the waves that surround the world and its lines, its shapes on the ceiling.

I know, Hale says, sits on the lounge by my feet. He stretches out my legs and parts them. I stare up to the falcon. Talons are out, right against the sun. The falcon waits.

When Hale moves close, in between my legs, he kisses me and he stays, does not pull away like the kiss my husband gives. Hale opens my mouth with his mouth. His tongue inside my mouth is smooth like Linda's fingers and his fingers on my skin, right against the seams are cool. I take in his plastic, how it is so close, so alive.

That night I see the moon outside my window and a table set with candles that match the light of the moon where my husband sits and smokes his cigar. My husband always does this before his dinner, smokes his cigar with a small glass in hand, the liquid inside the glass the color of the cacti when the sun goes behind the smog. Or the color of the rattle snake's tongue when it lashes out to the glass window, smacks it, asks for blood, but backs away when I come up to it and there is no blood to be had.

I am safe, locked away, a Barbie don't you see, I tell the snake, lift up the corners of my dress to show him the seams that hold me together. Outside my husband eats the red liquid, the smoke that snakes away.

Ready for the night? Linda comes up behind me, puts her smooth hands on my seams. We stand like this a bit, wait for the moment when my husband will turn around. But the smoke still snakes.

Let's put you in your blue, Linda says. She drapes the dress around me. The cloth is riveted silk. She pins it in onto my seams, opens up the holes in my ears and sticks in topaz studs. Linda walks me into the night and the moon.

Is my beautiful blue baby hungry? My husband asks when I am outside and at the table. He puts his cigar out and kisses me. I let my husband eat and the moon watches us, an odd shaped moon, almost blue too around the edges. Far out, the lights and the desert floor, bones alone, white under the moon, the eyes of the falcon red against the night, black feathers that follow the now invisible ants and find the eggs to claw and suck. And beyond all, Hale, his smell that goes into our tongues, that holds us under the sun, the hot sun that swells our seams.

I sense you are ready now, my husband says when he is finished, pushes his plate away and puts his hand on mine. His hand is still cold, the creases and lumps once again there under the moon.

Come to me in my study tonight, my husband says and gets up. I will wait for you, we will create a new meditation tonight. Like I promised. Come, as you are. In your blue.

I watch him walk inside, away from the moon to wait for me in the dark room.

The moon floods into the entrance hall. Close to the door there are windows and through them, the road, and the hill that climbs to the clubhouse. In the daytime it is sunny, this road, spots of trees shadow my bicycle till the top. And there the pool waits, always empty. And where the ants wait, always in line. And here he waits, Hale, a tray in hand, the caviar eggs ready to burst into ants that will crawl our plastic smooth bodies when we kiss and lie under the sun ready for the falcon to tear us apart in the sky. Ready

for the talons to drop us very, very far away, beyond the smog and the long cacti. But there is the bluemoonriver here, now, instead of the sun. The moon and the door and the road with no light, the library, and then the waves, the needle inside me. Tonight I will not be in my box and my husband, when the drums come, will take his creases and bone-white lumps and pull me open on the rug while I watch the world above. And in this way, I know, my husband will pierce me to create another me, me with seams and no hunger.

## Rent-a-Cat

Chat, come here.

I will call you Chat, says this girl with very long nails. They are painted black, like her lips.

Why Chat? You ask from across the sofa.

Wine? Girl gets up and with her black nails takes up the bottle of red and pours into her cup, yours, on the coffee table. At this point, I decide to sit between you two. You don't really want her do you?

Cheers, she says, you nod, take up the glass like she does.

Chat, chat chat, she says, pats her lap. I comply. Hop on. Those nails feel mighty fine, let me tell you. Like how they dig into my skin and really get down there, to the core, to the scratchy core.

He talk a lot? Chit-chatty type? You say, take a bird sip but keep the glass in your hand, swirl, balance. Poser.

What? Oh no, she laughs and her belly bounces me. I can hear it grumble too and I purr into it. We grumble together.

It's just, you know, the French word but like if you say it in American. She digs in those black nails after she says this. Yum.

Gotcha, you say, take another birdy bite of wine, look me straight, eye to eye. My almond amaretto stealer's and your blue-green wonders. I know how it goes. We're both gifted with wonderful windows to our souls, as they say. Difference is, mine glow with true, simple, happiness. That wonderful happiness that comes with just being loved on a

warm, soft, female bosom. I know how precious that is. You on the other hand. Your windows are false, like the way she will fill up a bath later with blue bubble bath elixir. And it looks so pretty, smells so nice. But believe me. Don't touch that pretty blue-green water. It is slimy and makes your hair stick all over and takes forever to dry. Shiver, shiver all night under the radiator and curse that deceitful bubble mirage. And that, in so many words, is the essential difference between me and you. You are part of that evil blue-green water. But I stay out. So stare all you want, blue-green eye devil. I'm onto you.

That right Chat? Girl says down to me. Not to you. I'm not quite sure what it is exactly she refers to, but I gargle my throat real good in agreement. Then she rubs under my neck and oh it's heaven. Jealous yet?

Starting to get a bit lonely over here, you say, flash her a blue-green evil wink.

You want to come join, she says, stops on my neck, twirls a bit of her own hair instead. Damn you.

Don't think Chittery will mind? You say this but don't wait for her to answer, put down your glass, and just slide on over. I know just where this is going.

Psst, you hiss at me, poke a finger around my belly area. To hiss or not to hiss. I hiss back, bastard.

Oh silly Chat, girl says, but there is no bounce in her belly and her black nails take me up and put me on the floor. She's all yours now. You see this yawn? This means I stand here and stare at you.

So sorry Ron, Chat can be a brat. She makes those rhyme.

Clever, I like. You say this and take her chin in your hand and give her a little peck. Which turns into a long peck. But I've had enough. I will turn around now and weave my way to the door and wait for Felix once more. Maybe after all, Ron, I'll admit, we're one and the same. And maybe my soul windows are all false with no gleam too. We just hop from lap to lap, bosom to bosom, and try to believe that it's true love we create.

See, the important thing is that they all love me, for that sliver of night, without a doubt. That's the nature of the business, alas. It's the type of girl. Lonely to a bone, but so sexy. And that's why I can ignore the guy. It's usually that kind of date. Like I'm the proxy to show off. Like hey look man person. I am a lonely sexy girl who loves. Of course they don't usually fall for it. Or if they do, they grab for me in their dog like doggone dog loving ways and I recoil, jump from that lovely lap, those lovely breasts that smile down at me. I stare at her from across the room. This is when she decides to take a bath. An evil bubble bath where you, because you are a dog, will join. I can smell the dogs and the dogs know, they know that I'm far superior. If they only knew the magic of the breast, the true magic of her voice, the way that a soft touch or a soft incantation with the throat, a little purr, can work millions with the heart of a girl. A beautiful, lonely, soft and true girl.

No, no, no. Don't get me wrong. You are not a dog. Probably. Look, I know how it is. She is soft, she is pretty, she smells nice. You want to lick her face in the morning, get all that salty goodness before she goes in the shower. You want to lick the soap off her wrists after, those tiny wrists with the tiny hairs that so perfectly hold that sugary sweet something she calls soap. Oh, I know. I know better than you, believe me. Why do



you think she let me sit there, all sprawled, all up close and personal? Why do you think she put her hands all over me, like all over me? And you meanwhile quarantined to the other side of the couch. Think about it.

Not to rub it in or anything. Don't worry. I don't really want to go as far as you want, because I'm no dog like that. It's just nice to be loved for a bit. I guess that's how you feel too, in a way. So no hard feelings. You'll get her love tonight, trust me. I felt it in her touch. How she strokes me but it's really it's you she strokes for. No pun intended. And tomorrow, me and you we'll both be back in our hovels, lonely and cheap with the rancid taste of instant love gnawing on our molars.

And I know you. You with your Conversees, messy gelled hair, rustic hunter look. Please. You, you'll solve that whorish hangover tomorrow with a morning cap of two Bloody Mary's at the café around the block. When you're done, the celery sticks will stand naked (like how you work up). Then you'll go home, roll a spliff, mutter away to yourself.

But I'll let you in on a secret. I'll give it to you straight. If you wait long enough, say like two hours after you leave tomorrow morning, like around ten, okay? If you happen to wait till ten, which you won't, a man with a curly cue moustachio will ring the doorbell. And if you happen to be here still, you'll open the door and meet Felix, my master. He always smirks underneath his smile, but you can't see this of course because of the curls. Regardless, Felix with said curled stash will dash past you and your groggy snot eyed hotness, half naked in kangaroo boxers. Felix will find me, curled up and snoring on that fur ottoman over there that is as of now off limits. Felix will pull me off with his expert hands, push me into the bag, the one that smells like piss and cat cum.

The zip will close, you will watch him salute to you, while the girl in the bedroom, is still sprawled, drunk, and happy. I will piss too then, claw and claw. And let out a very long, very long meow. It will echo in your ear drums after Felix slams the door. He will walk, calmly, down the steps and out into a very fine, fine blue morning. We will pass the corner café and you, how can it be. You will already be there, celery stick in ice, second drink on order, the memory of her halo-lit bare sprawled ass already wilted under a drugged induced afternoon doze.

Eight o'clock in the AM, the phone in Felix's room rings real loud. Esmerelda next to me lifts a grey, Persian eye, rolls around to her other side. Sometimes I wish could be one of those big balls of constant leisure. Have Felix give me a real love massage under my neck, around my ears, down my back, just for the hell of it, whenever he feels like it. Whispers sweet nothings to her, oh my big pooch ball, oh who's my fur queen. Really ridiculous stuff. You'd think he wasn't a grown man at all but some imbecilic half fetus. But, I'll be the first to admit it. I'm actually just a teensy weensy bit envious. How wonderful Esmerelda the Fur Queen must have it. Like, what if I was just loved for my luxurious nature, like really loved with treats and special massages. Then again, at least I don't have to get my 'do goosed up every time I service a lonely heart. Believe me, I've seen Ezzy on a bad hair day. Two words—rat's nest.

But I guess to each his or her own. Across the room is Samsun. He's one of those guys born without a hair to speak for. Not even nose hairs or what every man needs, his whiskers. But Felix books him like mad. Samsun paces all morning, scared he'll have to work his bald charm. I don't blame the guy. I would be nervous too if I was so ugly. Love

must be hard to get like that. But Felix swears some ladies just like it bare like their own smooth lady legs.

My real competitor is Miss Thang. She's the newest kitten on row. Felix switches them out, or just lets them go. They get hitched real quick but Felix always gets to name a price, any price from what I've heard. Love will dole out easy on a cute thing like Miss Thang. A little blue Siamese princess with soft coo calls that just ask to melt hearts. She knows it too. Even Felix falls for it, lingers a finger under her neck, lets her lick his arm hairs. Which is all good and fine for her, except that the types that likes the teeny kitten ones, also go for me, me the not so teeny, more wise, more lap hungry boy. I know because I was once her. Slight, Asian almond eyed, button cute tongue that just licked and licked. It all comes down to context then. Does she want to have a distracting litto thing? A baby to display affection on? Or, does she want maturity, one willing to please her because it is pleasure that she too desires? Fortunately, Felix always knows the answer and books accordingly.

Do you mind maintenance? His voice bursts into our room with the morning sun. We are all perky ears now.

Do you desire a fine head of hair, if you will, which might result in hair left behind, or would you prefer not to deal with that?

There is a pause, Felix yawns loud and bored. I can almost here him smash out a cigarette. I see Samsun stand still in his Sphinx pose, his regal, annoyed pose. Felix has descriptions up online, to speed the process. Felix starts to mumble real low and I angle my ears forty-five degrees for better reception.

Oh, oh, okay. I see. Well then. You are the date from last night? Yes I see. Hmm. I usually don't allow such things, plus it's usually just lonely ladies who are in need. But in this case I'll let it fly, with a little extra fee.

I take my ears down, let out a groan, know it's you, know now that it's me, since no one else worked last night. What could you want with me? I hate you, remember? But no one is there to listen. Samsun just keeps pacing.

The best part of any cat call is the trip over. Felix always takes a cab, charged to the client of course, including tip. What with the rates he charges it's no big deal anyway. Keep the clientele, crème de crème, as he puts it. Felix makes sure I get a good perch up on his lap so I can see how the lights go zoom zoom outside and out the corner of my eye I can keep a good watch on the cabbie air freshener, make sure it doesn't say too far left or right or else I'll pounce. Sometimes cabbie has on some Bengal hip hop and I can bounce on Felix's lap and watch the lights. This is what I call my pre-game.

We roll up to what they call a townhouse. I can see hedges, big bushes that smell like insects and mice poop. I start to growl and scratch a bit at Felix's red leather bomber that brushes the side of my bag. He swats me and rings the bell. It's true. I shouldn't get too excited about things. Need to keep it cool. How bad can you be? Must look all slick and calm. No time for juvenile fantasies of rolling in leaves and munching on crunchy critters.

Except that my growl can't stop because when the door opens it really is you, you Ron, you selfish Ron from last night with black nail Girl. You the wine swirling Ron. You that blue-green devil bath loving false lover, Ron. I want to scratch the bomber once

more, give it a real good rip, but I take a deep sigh, squint my eyes and hold it in.

Infantile rage is for rookies like Miss Thang.

“Ron,” you say, hold out your hand to Felix. Felix ignores it and does his usual salute.

“Where do we set up?” Felix peers back behind you, where this immense soft light shines. I try to peer too but can’t get too far, so I growl back at the bushes. Felix shoves the bag and me inside with his elbow so I shut up. We follow you into the white light, down a hallway, through a room with a fireplace that smells like burnt moth wings, a very nice smell I’ll admit. When Felix lets me out, we’re in the kitchen. I spot out the cave underneath the oven in case you decide to kill me. One gets accustomed too all the hazards of this job and plans accordingly.

“Appartment’s the whole bottom floor. Plenty of room. Drink?” You have a beer in hand, hop up onto this big white island in the middle of your very clean and bright kitchen. Track lights all around. The oven is huge. It’s like three caves in there. There must be mouse carcass hanging out somewhere deep in there. I get hungry when I’m in a new place. But Felix has my bowls all lined up, my sand box all racked. He cracks open a new can of Feline Feast. I smell it out real good but decide to touch it later. When you’re not looking. You look down on me from your stupid island throne, swing your Converses, scratch your ugly beast hair. Wannabe.

Didn’t know if you’d be okay with me asking for him today. But I’m a cool guy. Felix hands you the papers and you sign.

Will be back here at seven o’clock in the AM, sharp. Better have him in one piece. Felix saluts. Felix always did have a bad sense of humor.

Gotcha, you salute back to him. He's in good hands, you wink down at me. I think I'll leap up there and join you. So I can call him anything you say?

Sure. Make it personal. More believable. Seven o'clock. Felix squats down and gives me a scratch around the ears, his way of saying I believe in you. I like you too Felix, I curl my ears down. I watch him walk out the kitchen, hear him walk out the house and wait for the door to shut. Then I come around to your converses and jump up.

No! Bad boy! With one swat of the hand you push me back down to the ground. Meanie. I slouch over, growl, and make a low prowling over to the oven cave. If that's how it is I'll show you.

"Look here mister," you take a swig from your bottle. "No counter-tops. You got a fine coat going there, but I'd rather keep it off my eggs. But I'll tell you what." You scoop me up before I can make it under and I snarl my teeth but you just do this stupid little laugh and walk me out of the kitchen. I will admit though, your hands are awfully large, good and just enough rough against me. And then I see we're in the room with the moth scented fireplace that smells like orange peels now too and maybe a distant, ancient smell of cattle, red, blood, cattle meat and moth. The fire place cackles and you drop me down and then what is that under my feet! It is the five inch Persian carpet of my dreams. Oh so soft, oh so deep, oh so wonderful. Watch me roll, watch me dig, dig, dig. Good thing for you I just got the nails trimmed. You let out another of your stupid laughs and come down and scratch me under the neck. Maybe you're okay. I forgive you for the island. That can be yours this can be mine and maybe you can keep doing this to me forever and forever ever more and then maybe I will no longer even think that you are probably not a dog but will believe that you are most defiantly not a dog.

Sadly, you stop and go back to pop another beer. That's okay I guess. Now I can lick myself on this wonderful heaven that has a cackle moth cattle orange peel goodness burning right in front of it. When you come back you plop down on the big white sofa and stretch your legs, your Converse's out real good in front of you. They say the ladies like the long, tall guys, so I guess you have that going for you. Then you take up a remote and on goes the screen on the other wall. A very big screen. There are people moving around a space with sticks in their hands. I yawn up to you and you pat a hand on your lap.

"Here boy." I'll ignore that for now and hoist myself up on the other end. Man does this sofa thing just sink in. I yawn again and let out a meow, just cause.

"Why'd that girl call last night call you Chat? Women. She was a bit nutty, huh boy?" I come closer and you rub between my ears and I gurgle in agreement. "So obvious you were not her cat, plus leaving the advertisement out in the open like that. Real nutty that girl. You need a man like me, don't you?" You rub some more and I gurgle back. Maybe I'll come even closer now. When I do, you start under my neck. I'm not on your lap yet but I'm right by it and I can feel your warmth and you rub just the right way so I close my eyes and listen to you gulp some beer. Listen to the cackle, smell the moth, the orange, and feel the flash of the screen go in and out of my eyelids. It is all warmth and smell and scratch and so you're really okay, yes, you are quite okay by me.

And at night, when you go to bed, I follow you, lick the after shave off your cheek, let you pet me for a bit and then curl up at the foot of your mountainous bed with sheets that sink into the depths of my skin. There is a window that looks out onto rooftops and a moon that shines down on your face. I bury my face into the sheets like you do yours into the pillow and gurgle. It is all very shadowy with the beams of the moon. Then

I let my eyes close and listen to the sound of your breath. I try to follow it with mine. I dream of Persian carpets that swim in between warm flames filled with soft pieces of moth air that drift into my mouth and melt into my belly.

In the morning the doorbell rings. You groan out of bed and I hear you walk out, open the door. I don't want to move from the mountain but I do smell for a moment that red leather I know so well. But then the door closes and it is gone and you come back to me on the mountain and scratch me behind the ears.

All taken care of, Boy. Paid your dues, plus extra. No more worries, we're a team now, you say and scratch more, the way I like it so I let you feel my purr.

"Got a big day today, Boy, got a girl over later. No nut, real pretty, nice big ones, know what I mean? You'll like her, plus she'll like you, you wink, give a final good, deep scratch, then you fall back into the mountain, into your breaths, the breaths that I take on. I open my eye a bit and look at you, eyes closed, a bit of a morning beard. Well, it goes with your lumberjack look. It's okay I guess. Au natural, it suits you. Then I look at the window and the moon is gone and instead there are branches with leaves, and on one branch in between three leaves sits a bird I watch the bird, listen to your breaths and know that soon we will wake up and you will make eggs, home made Bloody Mary's and a nice can of Feline Feast for me. We will sit by the fire, with the smell of moth, and orange, and ancestral blood and you will show me her picture, and I will see her bosom, the soft light on her hair, just the way we like it. Then you will let your feet sink into the Persian plush and I will roll in it on my back. This will be to tell you that I love this, how this feels, and in a way, that I sort of, almost, love you too.